Putin’s Russia
How It Rose, How It Is Maintained, and How It Might End

Mikhail Dmitriev, Evgeny Gontmakher, Lev Gudkov, Sergei Guriev, Boris Makarenko, Alexey Malashenko, Dmitry Oreshkin, Kirill Rogov, and Natalia Zubarevich

Edited by Leon Aron

May 2015
Contents

Introduction 1

PART I
Political Economy, Political Geography, and the Politics of Federalism 7

Political Origins and Implications of the Economic Crisis in Russia 8
Sergei Guriev

Four Russias and a New Political Reality 22
Natalia Zubarevich

Russian Federalism: Reality of Myth? 36
Evgeny Gontmakher

PART II
Regime, Ideology, Public Opinion, and Legitimacy 51

Resources of Putin’s Conservatism 52
Lev Gudkov

Evolution of Values and Political Sentiment in Moscow and the Provinces 73
Mikhail Dmitriev

Triumphs and Crises of Plebiscitary Presidentialism 83
Kirill Rogov
PART III
CIVIL SOCIETY: DEFEAT AND RADICALIZATION? 107

The Difficult Birth of Civic Culture 108
_Boris Makarenko_

Moscow to Swallow Putin: The Rise of Civil Society in Russia's Capital 127
_Dmitry Oreshkin_

Islamic Challenges to Russia, from the Caucasus to the Volga and the Urals 142
_Alexey Malashenko_

Conclusion 165

Acknowledgments 169

About the Authors 171
Introduction

With an intellectual feast awaiting, I promise not to detain the readers of this compilation a minute longer than necessary and will use the introduction merely to whet their appetite.

At the outset of this project, my hope was to assemble a dream team of Russia’s top—and most of my favorite—political sociologists, political geographers, and political economists; ask them to write about what they think are the most significant trends in their field of study; and have them project three to four years ahead. To my surprise and delight, every one of the nine authors I sought out agreed. The result is a collection of essays unmatched, I believe, in Russian studies today in depth and breadth.

Caveat emptor: a reader looking for an elaboration of today’s headlines might be disappointed. While the annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine are definitely part of the conceptual framework for most of these essays, these events (as well as plunging oil prices and the economic sanctions against Russia) are not what this book is about. Instead, it is designed to describe and analyze some of the regime’s key structural strengths and weaknesses that are obscured by what Russian journalists call “the smoke” of the battle for Ukraine. As far as the regime’s fault lines are concerned, the evidence presented by the authors shows no reversal, or even narrowing, of these structural dysfunctions in Putin’s third presidential term.

Indeed, most of the problems—or perhaps more precisely, potential political, social, and economic crises—have been exacerbated since March 2014. To quote Boris Makarenko, “The rallying around the flag buys time for the regime but does not resolve a single socio-economic problem.” It is these postponed crises—their causes and their impact, on the one hand, and the regime’s engagement with
them, on the other—that this book is about.

To elucidate the antecedents and political implications of the unfolding economic crisis, Sergei Guriev opens by retracing Russia’s macroeconomic dynamics of the past 14 years. Guriev dates the start of the current economic crisis to early 2014, before international sanctions were imposed against Moscow and before oil prices fell. Instead, he lays blame mostly at the regime’s door for rejecting the institutional reforms needed to radically modernize the country’s economy and end its reliance on hydrocarbons.

The shrinking of the national economic pie is bound to aggravate the structural dysfunctions in the relationship between the Russian center and provinces, described by Evgeny Gontmakher, and extend the rifts between what Natalia Zubarevich calls “the four Russias”: segments of society sharply varied in their income, urbanization, education, upward mobility, and, as a result, modalities of their political attitudes and loyalty to Putin’s regime.

Like the United States, Brazil, or Germany, Russia is too big and too diverse to be both unitary and democratic. Instead, again and again throughout the country’s history, liberalizations have almost invariably been accompanied by greater self-rule at the local level, while authoritarian consolidations have inevitably led to a more rigid subjugation of the country to the center. Small wonder, then, that—as Gontmakher demonstrates—Putin has chosen and systematically pursued the latter path.

Already in Putin’s first presidential term (2000–04), the march toward “the vertical of power” (as Putin called the central government’s complete control over regions) included abolishing the direct election of regional governors, denying both an independent political base and loyalty to local leaders. Another blow to regional autonomy was the change in the composition of the Federation Council (the upper chamber of the Federal Assembly, or Russian parliament), where governors used to be ex officio members (“senators”) and thus had a say in national politics.

Yet, while the vertical of power has made a sham of constitutionally mandated federalism, Gontmakher points out the unintended consequences eroding the center’s rigid control of the unitary state.
The quality of the center’s decision making is being compromised by distorted feedback from the regions and increasingly selective implementation of the center’s decisions as local authorities increasingly deviate from its control. In the end, the relations between the center and provinces amount to what Gontmakher calls a “systemic crisis” in Moscow’s ability to govern Russia.

Examining some of the similar problems from the opposite end of the vertical of power, Zubarevich further develops her four Russias theory, increasingly recognized as one of the most useful tools for assessing and predicting the country’s political dynamic. Based on the economic geography and demography, she maps out in fascinating detail population clusters ranging from those engaged in “post-modern” economic activity to Russian citizens with the “lowest levels of education and upward mobility,” highlighting the “pronounced differences” in these groups’ “quality and way of life” and values.

***

Trends in ideology, public opinion, and legitimacy are taken up by Lev Gudkov, Mikhail Dmitriev, and Kirill Rogov, who agree that it was the constant and significant economic growth in household income between 2000 and 2008 that secured Putin’s high approval ratings and, with them, the regime’s legitimacy and what Dmitriev calls a “political equilibrium,” responsible for the relative stability of the regime during that period.

Delving into the causes of Putin’s personal popularity within the current political system of “plebiscitary presidentialism” (in essence, authoritarianism with elections that do not change the head of state), Rogov does not attribute the Russian president’s appeal to some extraordinary charismatic qualities. Rather, he attributes it to a “systemic phenomenon deeply connected” to both the needs of society, on the one hand, and the “institutional environment,” on the other—that is, the regime’s almost total control or manipulation of key political, legal, and social institutions.

Rogov diagnoses the key to the regime’s stability as Putin’s “super-majority” (overwhelming political support), which is held together
by a combination of economic and mobilization factors. The former category is predicated on economic growth, while the latter derives largely from the effects of a “value-centered rallying around the leader,” who is perceived as both an effective “wealth manager” and the “savior and protector of the nation.” Some examples of the mobilizing trends are the 2000 war in Chechnya, the 2003–04 war on the oligarchs, and the 2008 war on Georgia. (The 2014 annexation of Crimea and the war on Ukraine also fit well into this paradigm, as evinced by the 20–25-point upswing in Putin’s ratings.)

By contrast, Dmitriev investigates the economic, demographic, and, especially, value-related causes of the discontinuity in Putin’s approval ratings. He traces the first cracks in the supermajority’s foundation to the aftermath of the 2008–09 world financial crisis, with both the number of public protests and their provenance belying the Moscow-centric stereotype.

Still, even at the lower end of his ratings, Putin scored far better than the government bureaucracies at all levels, thus making the president’s personal popularity the key to the regime’s legitimacy. Gudkov explores some of the legitimizing themes (myths) of the Putin regime and the reasons for their resonance and appeal (in addition to the censorship and propaganda), including the allure of a “strong leader” at home and abroad.

***

Of all the fault lines explored in this volume, the one that has been the furthest from public view in the past few years of authoritarian consolidation is the disconnect between the regime and civil society, manifested by the 2011–12 mass protest rallies, which were spearheaded by the middle class throughout Russia.

Makarenko details the tall barriers impeding the development of Russian civil society. There is a historical tradition of top-down modernization in Russia, which from Peter the Great to Putin placed civil society under the state’s supervision and control, with private actors accorded, at best, the roles of what Stalin called “cogs” (vintiki) in a “huge and all-knowing,” in Makarenko’s words, state machine.
Another factor is the political, or rather apolitical, national culture, in which mistrust of any authority translates into mistrust of politics. Finally, cemented in large measure by the “power-property alliance,” the regime does its best to “retain its power monopoly at the cost of sabotaging modern political institutions.”

Yet, while very formidable, the obstacles to Russian civil society were and are not insurmountable. Makarenko reminds us that the “perennial subject,” the Russian people, did rise against the existing order in 1905, 1917, and 1991. There has also been a perceptible accumulation of what might be called “initial social capital,” also described by Dmitriev and Zubarevich. This term refers to the growing number of Russian men and women who “owe their prosperity to their own efforts rather than government paternalism,” resulting in values and attitudes “comparable to those of Western societies.” These and other precedents and trends amount to what Makarenko sees as structural factors “conducive to the emergence of a Russian culture of citizenship.”

It is this culture, along with the values and behavior of its main bearer, the middle class, that Makarenko and Dmitri Oreshkin portray in fine detail, correcting, along the way, a few stereotypes about the demographics of the Russian protesters, civil society’s ability to organize political actions, and the attitudes of society at large toward the public protests.

To Oreshkin, the most significant trend within Russian civil society has been the emergence of “self-governing” civil society groups that fill the vacuum left by the state, which is inefficient, corrupt, “free from any responsibility to the electorate,” and unable or unwilling to provide services and protect “the rights of the public.” Pragmatic and nonideological (or, one might say, ideologically inclusive), these nongovernmental organizations are involved in activities ranging from charity to traffic safety to exposing corruption, including falsification of educational certification, especially doctorate degrees.

One of the most impressive tests of civil society’s ability to self-organize was the monitoring of the 2011 Duma campaign in Moscow. Because of the monitoring, the authorities felt more constrained in their falsification methods during the 2012 presidential election;
as a result, Putin received less than half of Moscow’s vote, according to the official count—and probably closer to 40 percent in reality. During the September 2013 Moscow mayoral election, even more divergent were the tallies from polling stations monitored by volunteers versus those where authorities were in complete control.

By contrast, Alexey Malashenko delves into a segment of Russian civil society that is in many regards opposite to the one analyzed by Makarenko and Oreshkin. He details the symptoms and causes of the radicalization of Russian Muslims outside the North Caucasus, most notably in Tatarstan, “the heart of the Russian Muslim community.” Despite terrorist acts in Tatarstan and the neighboring Bashkortostan, the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in Europe’s oldest continuously Muslim community—5 million strong and predating the Christianization of Russia and the emergence of Russian state—has gone largely unnoticed. Yet it fits well within the pan-European trend of the radicalization of younger and seemingly assimilated Muslims.

The appeal of “nontraditional” Islam, especially to young Russian Muslims, is undeniable and has been growing since the early 2000s. The Arab Spring and the war in Syria have further radicalized the Salafist (Wahhabist) movement in Russia. Unfolding in parallel have been fundamentalist trends among Russia’s estimated 2.5 to 3 million migrant workers from Muslim Central Asia.

In the end—whether in the precarious state of the Russian economy, the relationship between Russia’s center and periphery, the divergent paths of the “four Russias,” public opinion trends, or the state of civil society—emerging in these pages is a finely textured portrait of a society rife in complexities, contradictions, and postponed but looming crises.

Now that your appetites are thus sufficiently whetted, I invite you to be edified and stimulated by the original, searching, and powerful chapters that follow.
PART I

Political Economy, Political Geography, and the Politics of Federalism
Russia’s economic performance in the last 15 years has surprised observers at least three times. First was the Russian economic miracle of 1999–2008. According to the International Monetary Fund’s World Economic Outlook, over these 10 years, Russia’s per-capita gross domestic product (GDP) doubled in constant prices (equivalent to the average annual growth rate of 7 percent) and grew sixfold in nominal dollars—from $270 billion to $1.7 trillion in current prices.¹

The second surprise was the catastrophic performance in 2008–09 during the global economic crisis. In 2009, Russia’s GDP collapsed by 8 percent, more than that of any other large economy.

Finally is the recent economic slowdown turned crisis. After the Russian economy seemingly recovered from the global economic crisis—growing at 4 percent per year in 2010 and 2011—it started to stagnate. Even before the annexation of Crimea, Russian economic growth had slowed to zero. Despite solid macroeconomic fundamentals, robust growth in the US and China, better-than-expected performance of the eurozone economy, high oil prices, and the return of political stability under President Vladimir Putin (who promised serious pro-business reforms), the Russian economy stopped growing.

In this paper, I will not discuss the first two episodes.² Instead, I will focus on the postcrisis slowdown, which mushroomed into the current crisis. My goal is to explain the origins of the slowdown, understand its political implications, and analyze its interaction with the 2014 crisis in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.
I will first state that the economic miracle preceding the crisis was real—and so is the current slowdown. Second, I will show that the only explanation of the latter is the poor investment climate, which is an essential part of the current political equilibrium. Third, I will speculate that current economic conditions imply the need to depart from the social contract that prevailed during the economic miracle years. This social contract presumed that the public would give up its political freedoms in exchange for economic growth. The slowdown effectively destroyed this contract and, in doing so, may have contributed to the decision to turn to imperial ideology and territorial expansion. Finally, I will try to forecast what all of this means for the Russian economy and the world.

**Russian Economic Miracle—and the New Stagnation**

In 1995, Daniel Yergin and Thane Gustafson wrote a book that contained three scenarios for Russia in 2010. One of the scenarios was *chudo* (Russian for “miracle”). Another scenario included rebellions in frontier regions and ultimate disintegration, while the third scenario foresaw a grim military dictatorship bent on expansion.

As often happens, real life turned out to be a mix of the three scenarios. In terms of domestic and external politics, Russia eventually followed the latter two scenarios. On the other hand, the economic performance of 1999–2008 was indeed miraculous from both an international and historical perspective. Despite the beating delivered by the global economic crisis, Russia was officially classified by the World Bank in 2013 as a high-income economy and was on track to join the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, “the club of developed countries”).

As my focus here is the slowdown rather than the miracle, I will need only to rely on the following two takeaways from my and Aleh Tsyvinski’s analysis of the miracle years. First, this 1999–2008 growth was indeed impressive and trickled down to all parts of Russian society. Second, the sources of this growth—growth in commodity prices, cheap and abundant labor, underutilized production capacity, low-hanging fruit of macroeconomic stabilization,
and first-generation institutional reforms of the 1990s and early 2000s—were by and large exhausted by 2008. Therefore, to continue the growth after the crisis, Russia needed to carry out substantial reforms to improve the protection of property rights, rule of law, and competition.

These reforms have not happened. After the postcrisis recovery, Russian growth rates fell substantially. Figure 1 presents quarterly GDP growth data, which show that the slowdown started in 2012. During the recovery in 2010 and 2011, the growth rates were above 4 percent, but in the second half of 2012 they fell to just 2 percent. The official GDP growth in 2013 was just 1.3 percent. The forecasts for the first half of 2014 entered negative territory even before the Crimean crisis.

One of the most interesting features of this slowdown is that it was a surprise to many observers. The *World Economic Outlook*, the

---

**Figure 1**

**Russian GDP Growth, Quarterly Data (Year-over-Year)**

flagship biannual publication of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), consistently predicted the 3–4 percent growth in 2013 up until October 2013, when it reduced its forecast to 1.5 percent. (See figure 2.) Even though the slowdown started in the second half of 2012—right after Vladimir Putin returned as president after Dmitry Medvedev’s one term in office—the IMF was still predicting growth as high as 3.4 percent as recently as April 2013.

The IMF was certainly not alone—the 3–4 percent expected growth was the official forecast made by the Russian Ministry of the Economic Development that was revised only in Spring 2013. In January 2013, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev actually expressed his dissatisfaction with the fact that the growth forecast was too low and said that Russia needed 5 percent growth per year for the years to come. This is not a coincidence: in his programmatic January 2012 article “We Need a New Economy” and in his first economic decree
PUTIN’S RUSSIA

(no. 596), signed on his inauguration day, May 7, 2012, newly elected President Putin made a number of promises for the 2012–18 presidential term, all based on the 5–6 percent growth goal.

Only in the Fall 2013 did long-term stagnation become the essential part of the mainstream economic forecast. In October 2013, Minister of Economic Development Alexei Ulyukaev spoke of the baseline scenario of 2–3 percent annual growth for the years to come. And in May 2014 he finally acknowledged that Russia was in a “technical recession” (negative growth in two quarters in a row).

Why a Slowdown?

Why has Russian growth slowed down? Initially, the 2012–13 decline was blamed on the business cycle. The narrative was that the Russian economy was below its potential steady-state growth rate; hence, the government needed to increase spending to support weak aggregate demand. However, this explanation was not consistent with the data. Contrary to the textbook description of an economy in recession, the Russian economy was characterized by low unemployment (5.0–5.5 percent), high inflation (exceeding the official target of 6.0 percent), booming consumer credit (by 40 percent in 2012 and 30 percent in 2013), and robust growth in consumption (7.0 percent in 2012 and 3.5 percent in 2013).

These data eventually debunked the cyclical explanation, and the government recognized the structural nature of the slowdown. Yet, initially, it preferred to blame the structural problems on external factors. There have been two versions of this argument. First, the “West is weak” version argued that the Russian economy is strongly integrated into the global economy and therefore suffers from the crisis in the global economy and, in particular, in the West. The second version, on the contrary, was based on the “West is strong” theory: the West was not weak but was jealous and hostile to Russia and used its strength to undermine Russia’s reputation and, eventually, Russia’s successful development. Putin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov formulated it in the following terms: “strong, successful, wealthy and healthy—such as we are now—are often disliked by others.”
The first argument, relating the weakness of the Russian economy to that of the West, is also not consistent with the data. Unlike 2011 and the beginning of 2012, when the US and Europe indeed continued to struggle after the crisis, in the end of 2012 and in 2013, the US economy embarked on a solid recovery. While the European economy was and is still weak, it is doing much better than could have been expected in mid-2012 when the Russian slowdown started. Finally, none of the major emerging market economies had a substantial slowdown in 2013; most of them actually had a growth acceleration, and so did the global economy as a whole. Not surprisingly, oil prices remained at historically high levels.

The second argument is essentially a conspiracy theory and by definition cannot be refuted by data. It is, however, unlikely that we would have learned nothing about such an anti-Russian economic plan after Edward Snowden’s and other leaks. Eventually even Putin himself, in his annual address to the Russian Parliament in December 2013, did acknowledge, “Let’s be frank: the main reasons for the slowdown in our economy are internal rather than external in nature.”

What were the internal problems? Unlike its OECD counterparts, Russia was not suffering from a debt crisis. During the miracle years, Russia paid off virtually all foreign debt and even accumulated fiscal reserves. Currently, Russia’s sovereign debt stands only at 10 percent of its GDP, and its two sovereign wealth funds (the Reserve Fund and the National Welfare Fund) add up to $185 billion, also about 10 percent of GDP.

Therefore, we cannot explain the slowdown by Russia’s macroeconomic problems. Figure 3 shows that the main source of Russia’s economic decline was the fall of investment. Although the other components of Russia’s GDP did not fall or recovered after the crisis, investment is still below its 2008 peak. This simple fact pinpoints a very intuitive explanation for the slowdown: Russia is no longer attractive for investors, neither foreign nor Russian. This explanation is also consistent with the fact that Russia experienced a net capital outflow of 3 percent of its GDP in 2012 and 2013. Also, Russian stocks were traded at about a 50 percent discount to other emerging markets even before Crimea.
The investors are leaving Russia for a very simple reason: Russia’s investment climate (the rule of law and protection of investors’ rights) is very poor—at least relative to competing capital destinations. For a high-income, urbanized, and educated country, Russia is unusually corrupt. Figure 4 shows corruption and level of development around the world. In this graph, Russia is one standard deviation more corrupt than the countries with a similar level of development (East European and Latin American countries). The level of corruption in Russia is on par with that of the poorest countries in the world.

The unusually high level of corruption in Russia is hardly news to investors or to the Russian government. In particular, Putin flagged the investment climate and corruption in 2012 as the most important barriers to economic growth. However, what is new is the
Russian government’s complete inability or unwillingness to tackle these problems and, consequently, investors’ ultimate disillusionment with government promises. Now that other sources of growth such as rising commodity prices, cheap labor, and spare production capacity have been exhausted, growth in investment is unlikely without reform, and therefore, stagnation is inevitable.

Given that the government has recognized and discussed this so many times, why does Russia not reform? It is not because the government does not know what to do. The very same government has written many reform programs—from Gref Program 2001–2010 to Strategy 2020 and Putin’s May 7, 2012, presidential decrees. However, these institutional reforms are now contrary to the interests of
the ruling elite. Rule of law and fighting corruption constrain the elite’s ability to extract rents from the economy and, thus, to hold on to power. Although these reforms are likely to result in faster GDP growth and prosperity for the whole country, they will reduce the incumbent elite’s ability to enjoy this prosperity.

Indeed, even if the opposition promises to preserve today’s elites’ wealth after the change of political power, it is not clear how the opposition could credibly commit to respecting this promise. This conundrum is formulated by Daron Acemoglu as the absence of the Political Coase Theorem. Politics are different from the corporate world, where the more efficient investor can take over an inefficient company by simply paying out the existing shareholders (the economic version of the Coase Theorem). By definition, in politics, there is no external enforcement of contracts between outgoing and incoming elites, especially in countries without strong and legitimate political and legal institutions. In such countries, the enforcement ultimately depends on the party in power.

This problem is the key explanation of the Russian elite’s preference for the status quo. The elite chooses to avoid institutional reforms that may raise the probability of political transition. Moreover, high oil prices, and therefore substantial resource rents, further increase aversion to reforms by making incentives for staying in control even higher.

The situation is therefore very close to the Brezhnevist zastoi (literally, “stagnation”), the last period of Soviet history when high oil prices resulted in a lack of economic dynamism in the Soviet Union. Important economic reforms were delayed, economic growth disappeared, and once oil prices went down in the mid-1980s—the Soviet Union went bankrupt and disintegrated.

Tsyvinski and I predicted that these risks may materialize in post-crisis Russia as well and described a “70–80” scenario. When oil prices were at $40 per barrel, we argued that if prices would rise back to $70–80 per barrel, then Russia would return to a 1970s–1980s style of stagnation, with Putin’s approval ratings at 70–80 percent because of the spending of the petrodollars, but necessary reforms would be forgone. We made only a quantitative mistake in not
foreseeing that the price of oil would recover all the way to $100 per barrel. Otherwise, the elite’s effort at preserving Russia’s political equilibrium is exactly like the 70–80 scenario predicted: high oil prices ensure sufficient rents for the elite to support the status quo, while promarket reforms would result in higher political and economic competition, increasing the likelihood of political change.

To sum up, the most plausible explanation of the slowdown is the deterioration of Russia’s investment climate, which in turn is an essential part of maintaining a no-reform political equilibrium.

**Political Implications of the Stagnation**

The economic stagnation has dramatic implications for the relations between the elites and public in Russia. Daniel Treisman carried out an empirical analysis of Russian monthly opinion polls for the Yeltsin and Putin years and showed that Russians’ support for the incumbent president closely correlates with their perception of economic performance. This analysis sheds light on the social contract of the miracle years. The government was corrupt and not accountable to the public. At the same time, the people were content with the material benefits afforded by the economic growth; therefore, only moderate censorship and repression were needed for the government to remain in power.

However, the very same argument implies that the 70–80 scenario is not sustainable in the long run. The lack of institutional reforms and proliferation of corruption destroy investment and growth, driving down public support for the regime. Therefore, the social contract of the miracle years is no longer feasible. To stay in power, the government has to choose one of two options. First, it can drastically increase transparency and accountability or follow the reform path, which is not consistent with the political imperatives of staying in power. The second option is to come up with a new ideology worth economic hardship or to drastically increase censorship and repression. The last of Yergin and Gustafson’s scenarios—the “grim military dictatorship bent for territorial expansion”—is certainly the most obvious solution for this problem.
We still do not fully understand why Russia decided to annex Crimea. Yet, this discussion implies that the economic slowdown is certainly one of the possible explanations—or, at least, a major contributing factor. In the end, very much in line with the government’s expectations, the aggression in Ukraine did distract the public from the economic slowdown and raised Putin’s approval ratings.

What Next?

The Ukrainian adventure has had a substantial impact on Russian economy. Although the direct cost of supporting Crimea is just several billions dollars a year (less than half a percent of Russia’s GDP), the threat of potential sanctions immediately affected investors’ willingness to invest in Russia. Capital outflow accelerated (as of September 2014, the official forecast for 2014 net capital flight is an unprecedented $100 billion, or more than 5 percent of annual GDP), the ruble fell to record lows against the dollar and the euro, and stagnation turned into a recession. In this sense, the sanctions hit the Russian economy in the most painful way: they aggravated country’s most severe economic problem—the deteriorating investment climate.

The Ukrainian crisis also showed both foreign and Russian investors that investment and economic growth are not a top priority for the Russian government. Even though the government understood that the annexation of Crimea and further escalation in eastern Ukraine would result in international isolation and substantial costs from sanctions, it still made this decision. This has demonstrated that the Russian elite prefer to remain in power through imperialistic and nationalist ideology even if the latter is very costly to the economy.

This strategy, however, can work only if the citizens are not sufficiently informed about the economic costs—especially, about the long-term economic costs. This is why the aggression against Ukraine had to be accompanied by increased censorship and repression. The government stepped up censorship of the Internet and, especially, the blogosphere. The state also continued to harass the
key opposition leaders who disseminated information critical of the government.

Can such a system last until 2018, the end of Putin’s current term in office? There are examples of nondemocratic regimes with censorship and repression that lasted not just for several years but for several decades. On one hand, Russia is rather rich, highly educated, and urbanized, so it is hard to control the dissemination of information and the activities of the political opposition. On the other hand, the regime is still powerful enough to bribe (or, if needed, intimidate) opposition political leaders within the country or in small countries outside Russia. So the system may indeed last for a long time. What is clear, however, is that continuation of the current political equilibrium will involve censorship and repression and will have a substantial negative impact on economic performance.

Another important tool of the regime in the coming years will continue to be its aggressive foreign policy. Economic hardship will be easier to justify in the presence of external enemies. In this sense, it is not impossible to have another Crimea, especially if the economic situation worsens.

Therefore, it is quite possible to foresee Russia in 2018 being a corrupt nondemocratic regime with a stagnating economy and aggressive foreign policy. On the other hand, nondemocratic regimes can fall apart overnight because of internal conflict among the elite or protests against economic hardships. The former is not impossible given that individual sanctions do impose tangible costs on members of the elite. The latter is also likely if the price of oil falls, or at least does not rise, and the government runs out of reserves.

Conclusions

I have argued that the Russian economic slowdown was a natural implication of the political equilibrium in which elites prefer the status quo to institutional reforms. Although the reforms would result in a better investment climate and, therefore, economic growth, they would also endanger the elites’ hold on power. Given the high resource rents and the resulting high stakes of staying in power, it
is not surprising that the Russian government preferred to continue with the status quo, in which corruption and expansion of state companies and politically connected businesspeople resulted in capital flight, reduced investment, and stagnation.

The slowdown has contributed to changes in domestic and foreign politics. Once economic growth was gone, the government could no longer rely on the social contract of 2000s, in which the elites were opportunistic, unaccountable, and corrupt but delivered material benefits to the public. Therefore, it had to come up with a new ideology or, at least, a reason to support the government that failed to produce economic growth. Annexing Crimea, and the accompanying imperialistic and nationalist discourse, are certainly a convenient distraction from Russia’s economic problems.

The economic implications of the Crimean annexation and the larger Ukrainian crisis are substantial. The direct costs of military operations and the support of the Crimean economy are limited and certainly affordable, and the immediate shock of the first rounds of sanctions is much more important, as reflected in the weaker ruble, intensified capital flight, and lower stock prices. However, the most important consequences will be felt in the longer term by both the Russian economy and Russian citizens.

The Crimean adventure has shown the world that Russia’s economic development and its integration into the global economy are a second-order priority for the Russian elite and can certainly be sacrificed if the regime feels threatened. In the long run, this will undermine investor confidence and remove the plausibility of restoring economic growth in Russia. Russian economic performance may still temporarily improve—for example, in the form of another oil price surge. However, long-term economic growth is unlikely to return, at least until a political transition takes place.

Notes

This paper is partially based on the Harriman Lecture delivered at the Harriman Institute at Columbia University on February 12, 2014.


4. For detailed comparisons, see Guriev and Tsyvinski, “Challenges Facing Russian Economy after the Crisis.”


10. Guriev and Tsyvinski, “Challenges Facing Russian Economy after the Crisis.”


Four Russias and a New Political Reality

NATALIA ZUBAREVICH

The economic and social differentiation in Russia is marked and persistent. In addition to regional differences, we see even more pronounced differences in the quality and way of life and the sets of values among four groups: populations in large, medium, and small cities and in rural Russia.

Center-Periphery Model of Russian Space: Four Diverging Russias

The basis of the center-periphery model is a hierarchy of dwellings—from the more modernized large cities to patriarchal rural areas.

“Russia One” is composed of major cities. The cities with populations of a million or more and those approaching them in size account for 21 percent of Russia’s total population, or 31 percent if cities with half a million residents are included. The proportion of those living in large cities has been steadily rising due to an influx of migrants.

The leaders of Russia One are federal cities with

- A postindustrial economic structure;
- A high level of economic development;
- The highest share of middle-class individuals (30–40 percent of the population);
- Well-educated individuals (in Moscow and St. Petersburg,
39–43 percent of the residents over the age of 15 hold advanced university degrees);

- A larger percentage of residents employed in the small-business sector; and

- High Internet penetration.

It is in the federal cities—particularly in Moscow, where financial and human resources of the entire country are concentrated because of the city's status as the nation's capital—that political transformations have proceeded faster and a growing protest sentiment has been accompanied by demands for government modernization. Electoral data also bear this out: in the September 2013 Moscow mayoral election, the opposition candidate collected 27 percent of the votes, and during the 2012 presidential elections, less than one-half of Muscovites voted for Vladimir Putin.

Postindustrial transformation of the economy and society has proceeded at varying rates in other million-strong cities. Progress has been faster in Yekaterinburg and Novosibirsk, as these cities have the appeal of being macroregional centers in the Urals and Siberia and are also examples of faster transition from the industrial economy to the postindustrial stage. These cities pull in more migrants as they offer more well-paid and modern jobs. The people's social environment and political preferences have been changing more slowly in million-plus-population cities that have kept their Soviet-era industrial specialization, such as Omsk, Ufa, and Volgograd.

Progress has been even slower in cities with a population between 500,000 and 1 million, particularly those with lower education levels and household incomes and with a higher percentage of the workforce employed in the public sector and industry. But even within this group, the differences are large: Tomsk, a university city with a population of 500,000, is well ahead of many larger cities in terms of modernization. Virtually all cities with a population of 500,000 are regional centers, and it helps them concentrate the resources of their respective regions, particularly human resources. In general, the key
factors of modernization are the size of a city and the concentration of human capital there.

But the modernization potential of Russia One should not be overestimated, as the communities in large cities are quite mixed demographically and ideologically. For instance, the share of elderly who heavily depend on the authorities is large (30–33 percent in Moscow and St. Petersburg). The middle class in large cities is also a mixed bag; during the 2000s, the share of bureaucrats, security and police officers, and other public-sector employees (school principals, hospital chiefs, and so forth) grew rapidly. In their case, modernization has been limited to higher consumption standards, whereas their values remained statist and antiliberal and their demand for modernization of institutions minimal.

About 9 percent of Russians live in cities with populations of between a quarter million and a half million people, primarily in regional capitals. In Russia, the capital status of a city makes its social and economic development more sustainable, but its human and financial resources are usually inadequate for modernization. This is an intermediate zone between Russia One and Russia Two, with the situation varying by the city.

“Russia Two” refers to medium-sized cities with populations from 50,000 to 250,000 people. They are home to less than 30 percent of Russia’s population. Not all of these cities retained their industrial specialization during the post-Soviet times, but Soviet-era values still hold strong. In addition to considerable employment in the industrial sector, these cities have a large number of people employed in the public sector, most of whom are less-skilled workers.

The economic situation varies across the cities of Russia Two: the highest incomes are enjoyed by residents of oil- and gas-producing cities in the Tyumen Oblast, and incomes are also somewhat higher in cities with large steel and coal industry enterprises—that is, in cities with export-oriented economies. In cities with export-substitution industries (machine building, the food industry, and so forth), wages are considerably lower than in the regional centers. Young people have been fleeing Russia Two for regional centers
where they work or study, and in most cases, they never come back.

Economic crises are particularly hard on one-company cities. There are more than 150 of these, and they account for 10 percent of the country’s urban population. During the last economic crisis in 2009, the central authorities financed mass-scale public works, primarily on the premises of the gorodoobrazyushchie enterprises (around which one-company cities and towns were built), to maintain employment. Yet a ban on layoffs and on enterprise shutdowns prevented the problem of inefficient employment from being solved. In 2013, economic stagnation brought that problem to the fore again.

The denizens of Russia Two, like the residents of the largest cities, have not been happy with the political situation in this country. During the 2011 parliamentary elections, the share of votes cast in favor of the ruling party (United Russia) in many industrial cities was as low as in large regional centers (29–38 percent). However, during the presidential elections, Russia Two residents voted for Putin because, more than anything else, they valued stability, employment, and wages and remembered well the 1990s, when enterprises would remain idle for long periods of time while workers would go unpaid for months on end.

The main reason for Russia Two to protest is the loss of jobs and wages. The liberal ideas of modernization are unpopular; the greatest value is a strong paternalist state and large-scale social policy. The residents of industrial Russia feel like they are the main “providers” for Russia; therefore, the Kremlin’s spin doctors have managed to pit the hardworking populace of Russia Two against the residents of Russia One who, in the language of the official propaganda, “only wag their tongues and produce nothing.” The existence of a political rift is confirmed by the outcome of the presidential elections. In the Urals, during the 2012 presidential race, Putin garnered twice as much support as United Russia received there in the parliamentary election in 2011.

“Russia Three” is the traditionalist and very inert rural heartland of most of Russia’s regions, as well as the communities in villages and small towns with a population of less than 20,000 (collectively,
more than one-third of this country’s population). In these cities, the levels of education and mobility are at their lowest; the public sector and agriculture provide most of the jobs; and a large share of those employed are in the “informal,” or shadow, sector. The periphery is apolitical and always votes for the incumbent authorities. In addition, Russia Three has been suffering from depopulation.

The borders between the three Russias are blurred. Obviously, the distribution of the population is not the only factor affecting the pace of modernization, but the center-periphery model helps identify the key differences.

“Russia Four” is yet another periphery, which comprises the underdeveloped republics of the North Caucasus (5 percent of Russia’s total population) and the south of Siberia (less than 1 percent). These regions differ greatly from the rest of Russia because they are at an earlier stage of the modernization transition: urbanization began later, the demographic transition is incomplete, birth rates remain high, the patriarchal clan-based structure of society persists, ethnic differences are acute, and religion plays an important role.

The rural population is still young, cities have yet to digest the growing migration from the rural areas, and the urban way of life is only just taking shape there. The modernized, urban population is too slow to expand, because a fairly large part of the educated and competitive young people are moving to the country’s largest cities. Internally, Russia Four is not homogeneous either: for example, the more urbanized North Ossetia and Adygeya, with predominantly Russian populations, differ in degree of modernization from Chechnya, with its totalitarian regime.

Divergent Factors. The center-periphery differences are typical of other countries, particularly those that are catching up in their development. In Russia, these differences have their own specific features:

- A wide gap between the largest cities and the rest of Russia.
• Considerable differences in social and economic development among midsized industrial cities geared toward exports and those catering to the domestic market.

• Vast expanses of a deteriorating and depopulating ethnic Russian periphery.

This division into four Russias is based on long-term factors and is very durable, with differences changing very slowly. During the economic boom of the 2000s, the highest rates of growth in incomes and consumption standards were enjoyed by the residents of the largest cities, where the better-paying jobs and the better-educated population are concentrated. Rapid consumption modernization has helped modernize the way of life and the set of values held by the population of the major cities in Russia One. The consumer modernization impetus gradually proliferated from the largest cities to the smaller ones. The 2009 crisis had a stronger impact on the medium-sized industrial cities of Russia Two. On the whole, the gap between Russia One and Russia Two widened in the 2000s.

**Postimperial Syndrome: The Four Russias Choice**

Until recently, it seemed that Russian nationalism and xenophobia were emerging as Russia’s main risks. These phenomena have been gaining ground since the mid-1990s, and the authorities have encouraged them since the late 2000s in an attempt to strengthen their positions. The result was growing nationalism among ethnic minorities leading to social destabilization, which the authorities ignored. These tendencies are still relevant but have temporarily receded, giving way to a different, more powerful way of mobilizing public support—the promotion of a postimperial syndrome.

The phantom pains and frustration after the breakup of the USSR were present in Russian society throughout the entire post-Soviet period, even as nostalgia was wearing off. In 2014, the postimperial syndrome was converted from its latent form into the current open one with the assistance of powerful anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western propaganda. The annexation of Crimea enjoyed massive
public support, and Putin’s popularity rating jumped from 60 to 82 percent between January and March 2014. In addition to increased support, the authorities now have an opportunity to attribute the worsening economic situation to malicious designs of foreign enemies. The rising tide of flag waving allows for a tighter policy toward domestic opposition, whom the president has called “national traitors.” Anti-Western sentiments which help strengthen the regime are obvious.

Anti-Western sentiments prevail across all four Russias, and restoration of the empire is generally viewed favorably. Survey results suggest that the modernized layer of the urban population espousing European values and rationally perceiving the world is scarce even in the largest cities of Russia. Consumption modernization has not yet changed what Douglass North called “supra-constitutional” values.

It is unlikely that the post-Soviet imperial syndrome will be overcome during the next 10–15 years. Not only has nostalgia for the USSR survived in the minds of the older generations, but also the imperial myth is being successfully reproduced in the minds of Russia’s younger people. The period of abrupt intensification of flag waving cannot last long, but support for Putin’s policy of, to use the regime’s official language, “in-gathering of the Russian lands” is here to stay for a long time as a value choice made by most Russians, no matter where they live.

The 2014 Crisis and the Four Russias: Impact and Consequences

The Russian economy plunged into a recession even before the onset of the crisis in Ukraine. In 2013, there was no growth in industrial output or investment, and 2014 saw the beginning of a serious economic downturn. The growth of household incomes in 2013 was minimal (3 percent) and largely stemmed from wage increases in the public sector. The fiscal position of the nation’s regions is deteriorating because of a reduced tax rate and shrinking transfers from the federal budget. The declining fiscal revenues notwithstanding, the regions have to implement Putin’s decrees to raise public-sector wages. As a result, 77 out of 83 regions are running fiscal deficits.
In the aggregate, the budget spending by the regions was 8 percent higher than their revenues. Russia’s budget is becoming unsustainable, as the regions’ debt reached 2 trillion rubles (31 percent of their own revenue net of the transfers from the federal budget). The regions will be forced to cut expenditures, mainly the number of social-sector institutions and their employees.

The impact of the economic woes on the four Russias varies. The underdeveloped republics (Russia Four) did not notice the 2009 economic crisis and are unlikely to notice a new one, since they live mostly off transfers from the federal budget and the shadow economy. The share of these republics in the total transfers to the regions of the Russian Federation is only 10 percent. The federal budget can afford to continue supporting them.

The peripheral Russia Three is also outside the risk zone. It has the largest share of pensioners, and older people are more loyal and manageable even if the rate of pension increases slows down. In rural areas and smaller cities, the share of public-sector and agricultural employees is higher. Wages in the public sector have increased, while the agricultural sector will likely become more competitive on the back of a weaker ruble and declining imports.

The industrial cities of Russia Two have been more deeply affected by the economic crisis, particularly hubs of the steel, coal, paper and pulp, and engineering industries, in which output began to decline in 2013. So far, big and medium-sized businesses have been very careful in their layoff policies because of pressure from the federal and regional authorities, but as the crisis exacerbates, the problem of unemployment will grow more urgent. It may be mitigated to some extent as the federal budget has allocated considerable resources to prop up employment (more than 100 billion rubles in 2014, or 20 percent more than at the peak of the crisis in 2009). But this will help only if the crisis is short lived, which is unlikely given the many institutional flaws of the Russian economy and recent international sanctions in response to Russia’s role in the Ukraine crisis.

Russia Two is headed for high unemployment and a drop in living standards. At the same time, it should be taken into account that the populations in the industrial cities in the central, northwestern,
and Urals regions have grown older: most of the workers are close to retirement age, which reduces pressure on the labor market. Wide protests are unlikely, since the population of Russia Two is less educated and will be more easily convinced by the all-out Kremlin propaganda campaign blaming the country’s economic problems on scheming foreign enemies.

One-company monotowns are the most vulnerable to the effects of an economic crisis, but a massive public outcry can hardly be expected there. Russia’s big businesses have learned how to lower social costs through management tools (like shorter working weeks, mandatory unpaid leaves, minimization of layoffs, reassignment of workers to other tasks within a company if certain shops have to be closed down, firing protest leaders, and a de facto actual ban on strikes) and to extract the most benefit from government support for employment. A rather effective alliance between the federal and regional authorities and big business has evolved in Russia, seeking to minimize social protest in industrial cities where large companies have their assets. The medium-sized businesses in monotowns are more vulnerable because the risks of shuttering undermodernized enterprises are higher. (During the 2009 crisis, regional authorities forbade owners of medium-sized businesses to close down unprofitable enterprises, making them work at a loss or sell to new owners; they also forced other companies in the region to buy products from struggling businesses.)

In Russia One, the creeping crisis (or, rather, slow recession) is currently not perceived as an acute problem, but the situation will inevitably grow worse. People in the major cities boast the highest level of education, incomes, and consumption standards and thus have a great deal to lose. The labor market is gradually adjusting to the worsening conditions by freezing wages in the private sector and slowly reducing employment, while households have employed various adaptation strategies. For the bureaucrats, who account for a sizable proportion of the middle class in large cities, the negative impact of the crisis is absorbed by higher wages and corruption rent. Emigration remains an option for competitive professionals who are not willing to adjust to the new political reality.
As the crisis deepens, the residents of Russia’s largest cities will be able to shake off the postimperial syndrome sooner and more rationally evaluate the consequences of the Putin regime’s antimodernization policies. But whether Russia One has the strength to protest and what the forms and scope of opposition to the Kremlin’s policies will be is an open question.

**Scenarios for the Four Russias**

Negative political changes in Russia are so swift that predicting anything is extremely difficult. Nevertheless, the general direction of the Putin regime is clear: antimodernization and isolationism. The only question is the depth and longevity of the trend. The new trend in the Russian state’s policies has many historical precedents: revolutions have always been followed by periods of counterrevolutions and attempts to restore old development models. In the case of today’s Russia, the antimodernization, counterrevolutionary trend is aggravated by the postimperial syndrome. One can think of four development scenarios.

**Back to USSR/Sliding toward Totalitarianism.** This scenario involves switching to the “besieged fortress” mode and tightening the political regime for quite a long time to come. This scenario implies greater control over big business under the threat of nationalization and its subordination to the political interests of the authorities, a mobilization-ready economy, ideological control over key aspects of life, restrictions on foreign travel, large-scale reprisals against the opposition and liquidation of the remaining independent media outlets, and restrictions on the Internet. This likely will lead to a sharp drop in the living standards of the entire population, particularly the middle class in the larger cities who are not part of the bureaucracy. Such a scenario no longer appears implausible, but it is more likely to materialize in the event of a full-scale Russian military invasion of eastern Ukraine and the introduction of sweeping Western sanctions as a response.

Should this scenario materialize, its implications for the four
Russias are easy to predict. The larger cities of Russia One would be hit the hardest, and their population would have to sharply lower their consumption standards. Resistance is unlikely to be broad-based in the repressive environment, but the modernized middle class would leave the country in droves. The differences between Russia One and the other Russias would become smaller because of the shrinking modernization potential of the largest cities.

The authorities would try to mitigate the negative consequences for the industrial Russia Two, which is the Putin regime’s political base. Budget-funded government contracts would increase, and so would support for employment in industrial cities.

Russia Three is another base of support for the regime, but in its case, the authorities may limit themselves to maintaining the level of pensions and wages for public-sector employees. The country’s outlying areas are incapable of protest and have always voted as expected. Under this scenario, the regime may remain stable over the medium term, while its more distant future would depend on the speed and depth of the economic crisis, which will inevitably worsen even if energy prices do not fall. As a result, Russia would lose almost all of its competitive advantages, except for commodities, and would find itself in the group of less-developed countries.

**Hard Authoritarianism.** Barring a full-scale invasion of eastern Ukraine, this is the most probable scenario. The prevailing anti-modernization trend with the imitation of Soviet practices and pinpoint reprisals against protest leaders will continue. The business community would demonstrate loyalty in exchange for permission to keep their assets, and no considerable nationalization of the economy would take place. The living standards would decline, but not too rapidly. Under this scenario, the educated population of the larger cities of Russia One espousing modern values would self-isolate, withdrawing into “internal emigration” (a passive form of protest), with just a few small groups of active protesters remaining. Emigration would occur on a lesser scale but would be enough to undermine the modernization potential of Russia’s largest cities.
Under this scenario, the authorities would also rely on the conservatism of the industrial and still-Soviet Russia Two and the peripheral Russia Three, but it might prove to be a less stable political support than the regime would hope for: after the annexation of Crimea, the mobilization resources based on the postimperial syndrome could be exhausted and the level of political support for the authorities would decline because of economic problems. The Russian authorities then are quite likely to encourage ethnic (Great Russia, orthodox) mobilization and xenophobia toward migrants as a new source of support for the regime which would inevitably exacerbate tensions in Russia Four in the North Caucasus.

In addition to the republics of the Caucasus, the cities of Russia One where the bulk of migrant workers are concentrated and the cities and rural areas of the Russian south where the influx of migrants is also massive would become a problem zone. The consequences of growing Russian and ethnic nationalisms are impossible to predict, and pumping up xenophobia might lead to disintegration of the country as the worst-case scenario. Although the imperial idea unites most of the Russian citizens, albeit temporarily, the national one is sharply divisive.

Returning to the Modernization Path after a Short Relapse of the Postimperial Syndrome. This may happen only if the elites split up and later reach an agreement to alter the country’s direction and replace the leader, which is unlikely. Even if the course of leadership is changed, it would be difficult to start modernizing institutions and to loosen the state’s authoritarian grip on business and society. Regrettably, during the post-Soviet period, particularly under Putin, all the institutions of society, as well as human and social capital, have deteriorated. A change of course in the context of a protracted economic crisis would lead to temporary loss of control and chaotic decentralization. This is virtually inevitable at the stage of abandoning strict authoritarianism.

In this scenario, Russia Two would lose state support; its population would protest but would do so warily because of the low social capital of the industrial cities’ population and a limited ability
to act collectively. Russia Three would adjust to the changes using traditional survival techniques (for example, subsidiary farming, picking mushrooms and wild berries, or fishing). Russia One would continue to be the leader of change, but at a much lower level of social and human capital in the largest cities, which would limit the modernization potential.

This potential is further diminished by the fact that the Russian authorities have raised institutional barriers that would impede the progress of Russia One. Thus, a law has been passed abolishing direct mayoral elections in the country’s 67 largest cities (excluding the federal centers) to prevent opposition candidates from being elected. In 2012, gubernatorial elections were reinstated, but with a system of filters to prevent the opposition from entering the races. This will enhance the legitimacy of governors, but within the regions the system in which strong mayors of the largest cities counterbalance the regional governors will be destroyed. In the context of weakening federal authority, such an imbalance would facilitate the emergence of authoritarian regional regimes.

To bring this country together, the new Russian authorities would again take a step toward authoritarianism. Russia would again fall in the same pit, confirming the relevance of the path-dependence theory that explains how development is limited by the system of values prevailing in society. These are informal norms and rules deeply rooted in the life of nations and linked to the behavioral stereotypes of large population groups, which makes them stronger than formal institutions (laws).

**Forcibly Toppling the Existing Regime through Revolution.** This is the least likely scenario. The main role under this scenario would be played by Russia One—or, rather, the nation’s capital—but the outlines of such a scenario are not discernible for the time being, and its consequences are too harrowing to even contemplate.
Conclusion

In the post-Crimea political environment, Russia One is an obvious loser. It cannot strengthen its influence on the nation's development by introducing innovative values and diffusing them through the hierarchy of cities. Under the more likely future scenarios, the authorities would isolate Russia One and rely on the conservative semiperiphery and periphery (Russias Two and Three).

Interactions between Russia One and Russia Two are unlikely under any scenario, as their interests diverge in the short and medium term: the residents in major cities are keen to see modernization of the state, while Russia Two values social and economic stability (employment and wages) above anything else.

The problems of Russia Four heighten the risks associated with Russia's development under all scenarios. Under the harshest scenario, these problems may be temporarily frozen with the help of government-sponsored violence, but that would increase development risks further into the future.

Notes

1. According to a survey conducted by the Independent Institute of Social Policies in 2012.
4. Ibid.
Russian Federalism: Reality or Myth?

EVGENY GONTMAKHHER

Under its constitution, the Russian Federation “is a democratic federal state with a republican form of government under the rule of law.” Such a framework for the Russian state was de facto established as a result of the 1917 revolution, whereupon the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was set up in 1922 to replace the tsarist empire. At that point, Russia entered the USSR as a federal republic consisting of several dozen regions, territories, and ethnic autonomous areas.

Neither the abrogation of the 1922 union treaty in 1991 nor Russia’s newly acquired national sovereignty had any material impact on its federal system. However, a number of significant clarifications are in order.

First, despite the unitary nature of the Russian Empire stemming from the tsars’ virtually unlimited power, the empire featured certain aspects of a confederation. For instance, the kingdoms of Poland and Finland enjoyed certain special rights under the Russian Empire. Poland had its own system of local government, and Finland’s Parliament (Sejm) was vested with extensive powers and even printed its own currency. In addition, the khanates of Khiva (part of present-day Uzbekistan) and Kokand (parts of present-day Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan), while parts of the Russian Empire, were independent as far as their domestic arrangements were concerned.

Second, even though formally the USSR was a federation, in fact, starting as early as the late 1920s, it turned into a unitary state featuring a rigid top-down power structure, with the Communist Party and security services providing its skeleton. Until his death
in 1953, USSR leader Joseph Stalin enjoyed as much power as Russian emperors.

Third, however, starting in the 1970s, the Stalin-established system began to exhibit features that did not quite fit into the rigid unitary arrangement. The Communist Party elites of the Central Asian republics and, to some extent, the Transcaucasian republics, managed to initiate the process of setting those areas apart from Moscow. Greater autonomy came in the forms of more control over the local economy (except for the defense sector) and a gradual renaissance of the local religious traditions.

Leonid Brezhnev, who led the USSR between 1964 and 1982, paid little attention to these developments, as did his coterie, lulled by the local leaders’ assurances of loyalty to Soviet ideals. However, eventually, it was precisely these leaders of the party establishment across all the Central Asian republics (except for Kyrgyzstan) who took power as the first presidents of the post-Soviet independent states that have come to exist there: Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan, Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan, Saparmurat Niyazov in Turkmenistan, and Rakhmon Nabiev in Tajikistan. Developments in Transcaucasia were more complicated, yet after several years of post-Soviet chaos, former Communist leaders Eduard Shevardnadze and Geidar Aliev became the presidents of Georgia and Azerbaijan, respectively.

The late-Soviet tendency of weakening the rigid unitary state was also visible in some other republics of the USSR. Once those republics gained independence in early 1990, former top Communist brass ascended to the presidency: Algirdas Brazauskas in Lithuania, Leonid Kravchuk in Ukraine, and Mircha Snegur in Moldova.

This history is relevant to the examination of contemporary Russian federalism in that even in a country that for centuries has been ruled on the basis of the “top-down power vertical,” there were instances of its regions enjoying a special autonomous status.

The Evolution of Contemporary Russian Federalism

The Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (RSFSR) was part of the USSR between 1922 and 1991. The last RSFSR Constitution was
enacted in 1978. Interestingly, that constitution uses only the term “federalism” and its derivatives in the republic’s name. This does not mean, however, that the aforementioned special status was obtained, to varying extents, only by ethnic areas added to Russia’s historic core. As early as the 1970s and 1980s, the instances of distancing from the center (obosoblenie), veiled with Soviet-style rhetoric, could be observed in the national autonomous areas of the North Caucasus, Tatarstan, and Tuva.

In 1991, when the RSFSR acquired the status of an independent nation, the Communist Party nomenklatura (a group of individuals who were appointed by the Communist Party to fill influential positions in Soviet Union government and industry) occupied all the new government positions in the ethnic autonomous areas and beyond. Suffice it to say that Russia’s first president, Boris Yeltsin, had served as a candidate member of the Politburo and the Communist Party organization of Moscow. In more than one-third of Russia’s regions, Yeltsin-appointed presidents, chief executives, and governors were former first secretaries of the local Communist Party committees or other high-ranking members of the Soviet nomenklatura. In addition, roughly one-third of the then-regional leaders had been “red directors”—that is, managers of industrial and agricultural state-owned enterprises.

Such partial resurrection of the nomenklatura, however, did not re-create the Soviet unitary system. As the tide of democratic transformation swelled, numerous amendments were incorporated into the RSFSR Constitution; one such amendment expressly defined Russia as a “sovereign federal state, created by the peoples historically united in it.” Indeed, actual politics of the early 1990s were fairly consistent with Boris Yeltsin’s famous dictum of August 1990: “Take as much sovereignty as you can swallow.”

In response, the so-called “parade of sovereignties” started to unfold. Autonomous ethnic subdivisions within Russia and even a few historically Russian regions went on to adopt declarations of sovereignty, not bothering to wait for the USSR’s demise. The regions furthest along the path toward independence were Tatarstan and Chechen-Ingushetia; the latter went on to split into two independent
political subdivisions, one of them the Chechen Republic. These regions evinced such symptoms of de facto independence from the USSR as the failure to remit taxes to the federal budget and the establishment of the region’s status as (according to Tatarstan’s constitution) “a nation associated with the Russian Federation only through a mutual delegation of authority.”

Russia’s de jure collapse was prevented by drawing up agreements on the delineation of powers between the federal center and the regions seeking independence, and a so-called “asymmetric federation” had evolved nationwide by 1993. The new arrangement’s key feature was that, unlike in a unitary state, each member territory “retained significant distinctions both de jure and de facto.”

Adopted in 1993, Russia’s new constitution reaffirmed the nation’s status as a federal state. Moreover, it proclaimed that “in the dealings with the federal government authority, all member territories of the Russian Federation shall be equal.” However, given the situation at the time (an asymmetric federation), this declaration was more wishful thinking than a statement of fact. A number of regions (Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Yakutia, the Sverdlovsk region, and St. Petersburg) enjoyed broader autonomy than other territories. Their privileged status was evident, most conspicuously, in a de facto lower rate of taxation by Moscow. This situation became possible because of the personal political weight of these regions’ leaders.

However, after Vladimir Putin assumed power in 2000, a new phase began in the history of Russian federalism. By splitting the nation into seven (eventually, eight) federal districts, appointing his representatives to each district, and endowing them with broad powers, Putin launched a campaign against asymmetric federation. In particular, it took only a short while to address the problem of the inconsistencies between regional laws and federal rules and to abolish all taxation and economic preferences associated with the special status of certain ethnic autonomies. Most notably, force was used to address Chechen separatism.

But Putin did not stop there. The Russian president took a series of actions to turn Russia into a unitary state. Thus, in 2001, the procedure of appointment to the Federation Council, the Russian
parliament’s upper chamber, was revised. Whereas previously it had consisted of chief regional executives (the governors) and the chairmen of regional legislative assemblies (dumas), now only regions’ representatives are delegated. Meanwhile, former governors or federal politicians to whom such upper-chamber seats effectively mean nothing more than an honorary retirement make up a significant percentage of such members. Therefore, the Federation Council largely serves as nothing more than a decorative rubber stamp for the State Duma.

Along the same lines, direct elections of the heads of the federation’s “subjects” (governors) were abolished in 2004. Subsequently, governors were de facto appointed by the president. The situation lasted until early 2012, when direct elections of governors were reintroduced at the initiative of then-president Dmitry Medvedev. Still, this decision has been devalued by the simultaneous introduction of a so-called “municipal filter”: to be registered as a gubernatorial candidate, one has to obtain written consent of 5 to 10 percent of a region’s municipal deputies. Given the effective monopoly enjoyed by United Russia at the municipal level, this filter becomes an insurmountable obstacle for politicians who are genuinely opposed to the powers that be. In addition, as amended in 2013, the aforementioned law authorized regional dumas to elect governors, thus abolishing direct popular election of governors altogether.

Is Russia a Unitary State?

At first glance, Vladimir Putin’s Russia appears to be a rigidly unitary state where constitutional federalism exists only on paper. However, while acknowledging that federalism in Russia is a sham (as I have shown), I would like to list a few arguments against an unqualified designation of modern-day Russia as a unitary state.

To begin, the popular assumption that Vladimir Putin has built a top-down power vertical is not unchallengeable. Ideally, a power vertical system should mean that any signal from the topmost level is channeled to the bottom level of government without distortion
and then returns as feedback enriched with appropriate real-life information allowing for adjustment of subsequent commands from above in an endless process. In theory, such a structure of the state apparatus would allow it to survive forever by enabling it to make appropriate and timely decisions and providing it with the flexibility to adapt to any external development. The most successful examples of that type of government can be found in smaller Asian countries with authoritarian regimes (Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam) or in enlightened monarchies (Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, or the United Arab Emirates). However, these instances, too, are far removed from this ideal, which preordains their potentially very lengthy but inevitable evolution into a qualitatively different state. The developmental experience of Taiwan, Thailand, and South Korea testifies to that.

As regards Russia, its top-down power vertical is no more than a mere myth sustained by Kremlin propaganda to foster a feeling of stability among the populace by propagating the belief that “Big Brother” is watching you—that is, that “he” is resolving all your problems in exchange for your loyalty.

Let’s examine how the regime actually develops and implements crucial government decisions.

Every day, Putin receives information and analytical briefs from various sources, such as the Foreign Intelligence Service, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Federal Security Service, and Ministry of the Interior. This is a normal practice for the leader of any country. However, to gain a proper understanding of ongoing developments, the national leader also gets information from within the public policy space by interacting with parliament members (including the opposition), the general public, and the media. It is the latter component that modern-day Russia lacks. Putin has surrounded himself instead with numerous imitation structures:

- The United Russia Party, whose entire ideology boils down to being unconditionally loyal to Putin. As a result of less-than-free elections, it controls virtually all legislatures, from federal to municipal;
• The State Duma, where United Russia rubber-stamps any, even patently absurd, bill proposed by the president and the government;

• Parliamentary “opposition” (the Communist Party, A Just Russia, and the Liberal Democrats), which usually joins United Russia in votes on the most important issues;

• The Civic Chamber, which ought to function as an independent nongovernmental organization, but in fact, like hundreds of such related government-owned organizations, operates under the supervision of the presidential administration;

• Business associations (the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, Delovaya Rossiya, Opora Rossii) and the so-called “independent” trade unions (Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia), which act as appendages to United Russia;

• Major nationwide TV networks, which feature programming prescribed by the presidential administration; and

• Governors, the vast majority of whom are United Russia members.

At the same time, Putin hardly ever communicates with the independent political, expert, or academic communities, while his annual live call-in shows are painstakingly stage managed. Therefore, it is fair to say that the Russian president lacks balanced, analytical information regarding the real situation in most, if not all, aspects of the nation’s life.

In the course of decision making, in addition to the “information” received through the channels I already enumerated, Putin relies on his intuition and hardly ever holds discussions before making decisions—even in the narrowest of circles. It has now become a tradition for even cabinet members to learn of many crucial presidential decisions from media reports or, at best, just before a decree is signed or a bill is introduced into the Duma. A typical example involves a packet of decrees signed by Putin on the Inauguration Day of his third
presidency (May 7, 2012), in which he set ambitious goals for Russia’s socioeconomic development for the next few years. The cabinet members learned of those decrees after the fact and, since then, have been frantically looking for ways to implement and fund them.\(^\text{11}\)

It is true that decisions made at the top are communicated down along the power vertical, all the way to regional and even municipal authorities. Yet, on the way down, those decisions are affected by numerous distortions, mostly arising from the fact that these authorities take no part in making the decisions and therefore fail to understand their essence. Federal officials, not to mention government agencies in the provinces, are afraid to ask for clarifications or detailed instructions, fearing such inquiries might make them appear incompetent. Hence, they resort to various independent interpretations that often distort the original concepts devised in the highest offices. To report their successes, officials feed upward misstated information that is accumulated and presented to the leader even by his inner circle, without any critical review whatsoever. Meanwhile, as I have described, any independent expert analysis of these developments is not taken into account. The reason is simple: just like their colleagues at the bottom of the power vertical, the highest officials view retaining their jobs as an end in itself.

As a result, the management of regional socioeconomic processes has been effectively lost. Therefore, the socioeconomic discrepancies seen across Russian regions are huge and growing (table 1).\(^\text{12}\)

Neither in a federation nor a unitary state that throughout its 70-year Soviet era had proclaimed allegiance to egalitarianism, including in regional development, is such regional “centrifugation” (razbeganie) acceptable. Already in post-Soviet Russia, in 1996, President Boris Yeltsin’s decree, which affirmed principal regional policies, referred to “equalization of the regions’ socioeconomic development conditions.”\(^\text{13}\) Not unimportant also is the fact that in its regional policies Russia models itself after the European Union, which has been implementing strong programs to support relatively weak territories.\(^\text{14}\)

The data in table 1 show that socioeconomic processes in Russia have been evolving independently of the state, which, at least in
theory, ought to act as a powerful institution for containing regional divergence to an optimal level. However, the huge windfall in the 2000s from oil, gas, and other commodity exports has largely been spent to maintain the central government and to implement inefficient and expensive state-initiated projects (such as the Sochi Olympics and the APEC Summit in Vladivostok). Naturally, most of this money was gobbled up by corruption. Only a relatively minor portion has been channeled to the government’s Stabilization Fund (now split into the Reserve Fund and the National Wealth Fund), as well as paternalistic social programs.

Throughout the years, the government failed to attend to its most important task: the creation of development-promoting institutions in all areas, from politics to the social sphere. This government function becomes especially vital in the case of a sudden, effectively revolutionary transition from one socioeconomic system to another. However, as the Russian example demonstrates, the incompleteness of such a transition may extend this period to a very long time (more than 20 years, in Russia’s case) and, as a result, engender elements of backtracking. A very good example of this is Russia’s economic dynamic: with the institutional base having remained deeply flawed, GDP growth dropped to less than 2 percent in 2013,

## Table 1

CROSS-REGIONAL SOCIOECONOMIC DISCREPANCIES IN RUSSIA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gross regional product per capita</td>
<td>170,250 ($5,345)</td>
<td>915,583 ($28,744)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual cash income per capita</td>
<td>7,019 ($220)</td>
<td>36,277 ($1,139)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the Ministry of Economic Development in its official forecast sees no improvement in coming years. And this when Russian crude was trading at roughly $110 per barrel!

Next, as the bulk of top-down signals arrive in the provinces already distorted (and there are distorted further), the local authorities effectively have a free hand to pursue their own policies that, in reality, depend only minimally on Moscow’s wishes.

This phenomenon is evinced by the disparity in investment attractiveness among the Russian regions. On one hand, a group of more sophisticated governors in the Kaluga, Ulyanovsk, and Sakhalin regions, as well as the Republic of Tatarstan, have created relatively favorable—by Russian standards—investment environments for businesses, including foreign businesses. On the other hand, most Russian regions are toxic for businesses, large as well as small, which ultimately explains Russia’s generally unfavorable investment climate.

De facto independence from the federal center creates fertile ground for corruption. Local officials who lack any actual supervision by way of the top-down vertical and who suppress civil activism and independent media in their regions not only collect fealty from businesses operating in their domain but also effectively take part in running such businesses. This blending of government and business is an inherent feature of the present-day system of the Russian state. Political scientist Dmitry Oreshkin went as far as to coin the term “burness,” or “bureaucratic business.”

The apotheosis of the federal center’s loss of governance of the regions can be found in the North Caucasus and, particularly, in Chechnya, which has openly introduced numerous local laws ostensibly based on the Islamic traditions (sharia) yet actually rooted in the unlimited power of essentially feudal clans.

At the same time, in a number of ethnic Russian regions, the self-identification of the population is beginning to feel at odds with that of Russians in general. Such examples include the Kaliningrad region, where pro-European attitudes are popular, and most Far Eastern regions whose residents feel abandoned by Moscow.

Summing up the decision-making processes in present-day Russia, one could confidently state that no actual top-down party
vertical exists. Therefore, no unitary state exists in the proper sense of the word.

Then, what type of government exists in today’s Russia? In fact, it is a spontaneous confederation characterized by (1) an extremely weak shared legislative framework; (2) a massive imitation of nationwide political, public, and socioeconomic institutions; and (3) a diversity of special statuses enjoyed by its constituent regions.

**What Next?**

For 2018–19, the most likely scenario would involve no radical changes in the fundamentals of the modern-day Russian state. The reason for this is that the nation’s spontaneous configuration is held together and protected from a formal divorce (akin to the one the Soviet Union experienced in 1991) by the prevailing fiscal system.

I have already noted earlier in this paper the reasons for the fiscal system’s highly centralized nature. In 2012, only 11 member territories of the Russian Federation acted as federal budget donors (contributed more in revenue than in aid from the federal center). As a result, the remaining 72 regions lack independence in resolving their own issues, which makes them reliant on intergovernmental fiscal transfers, subsidies, and grants. On obtaining the cash, the local authorities effectively use it as they wish, ignoring the designated purposes of such disbursements. This is manifest, in particular, in the redistribution of fiscal funds in favor of “patronized” businesses.

An analogy may arise with the former Yugoslavia, whose collapse was precipitated, among other key reasons, by the unwillingness of its relatively wealthy republics (such as Slovenia and Croatia) to share wealth with the poorer regions (such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, or Macedonia). However, this analogy is not applicable to Russia, for the latter is not a polyethnic federation. According to the 2010 census, more than 80 percent of its population consider themselves ethnic Russians. The only exception that provokes interregional tensions because of the ethnically based fiscal distribution patterns involves subsidies for North Caucasus republics and, in
PARTICULAR, CHECHNYA. TO AN ORDINARY RUSSIAN, THESE SUBSIDIES SEEM EXCESSIVE.

A PERSON BLINDLY FOLLOWING THE MYTH OF THE RUSSIAN TOP-DOWN POWER VERTICAL COULD ASSUME THAT PRESENT-DAY RUSSIA IS HELD TOGETHER BY ITS SECURITY ESTABLISHMENT. THIS, HOWEVER, IS NO LONGER TRUE. THE CORRUPTION AMONG “SECUROCRATS” IS JUST AS PERVERSE AS IN THE OTHER SPHERES OF RUSSIAN LIFE. “CORRUPTION IS PENETRATING THE MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT,” SERGEY FRIDINSKY, RUSSIA’S CHIEF MILITARY PROSECUTOR, ACKNOWLEDGED IN 2012.¹⁹

RUSSIA’S TEXTBOOK IMAGE OF A BRIBE TAKER IS A TRAFFIC COP. YET CORRUPTION IS LIKewise pervasive throughout all other units of the Ministry of the Interior, particularly the components dealing with economic crime. In a December 2013 address to the Federal Assembly, Putin mentioned that the nation was home to “Amoral International, which consists of out-of-control, insolent people from certain southern Russian regions and corrupt law enforcement officials who cover for ethnic mafias.”²⁰

Still, despite these problems, the centralized fiscal system is likely to be able to maintain the present-day stable confederative system until 2018–19, even as Russia’s economic growth is petering out. So far, the government has substantial financial reserves to mitigate social problems:

- As of December 1, 2013, the Reserve Fund and the National Wealth Fund held $175 billion, or roughly 9 percent of GDP.²¹

- In December 2013, in addressing the Federal Assembly, Putin stated that the Russian economy must be “de-offshorized.”²² If implemented, the measure would bolster the attempt to keep business funds within the country.

And even if a gradual reduction in the state social spending cannot be ruled out, the reserves will, with a high degree of probability, mitigate this process to make sure that popular discontent does not reach levels that would jeopardize stability. The only uncertainty through 2018–19 involves the situation within the Russian ruling elite. The growing awareness of a systemic crisis that Russia has been slipping
into is shared not just by the opposition (within or outside of parliament), but also by major private businesses and certain individuals in and around the federal government. Clearly, one should not overestimate such forces’ capability to cause a radical U-turn politically using behind-the-scenes maneuvers, but such a likelihood can in no way be completely discounted.

Looking beyond the 2018 presidential election and assuming that it would return Putin to presidency, the current confederative structure of the Russian state is unlikely to survive yet another of Putin’s six-year terms without a substantial upheaval. It is becoming obvious that without deep institutional reforms, the probability of even the gloomiest scenarios of Russia’s development within its current borders will go up sharply.

Notes


6. Ibid.

7. “Asymmetric Federations,” Yandex Dictionary, 2002, http://slovari.yandex.ru/~книги/Конституционное%20право%20РФ/Асимметричная%20федерация/. There are a number of “asymmetric federations” around the world. These include India, Tanzania, Brazil, and Canada.
12. Notably, if discrepancies are measured as a quotient of the highest value divided by the lowest value, the differentiation appears to be falling. In fact, this is a purely arithmetic effect. To illustrate real-life discrepancies, it would be more appropriate to rely on changes in the differentiation of absolute figures.


PART II

Regime, Ideology, Public Opinion, and Legitimacy
Resources of Putin’s Conservatism

LEV GUDKOV

In Russian politics, 2013 was marked by the Kremlin’s war on civil society. Its immediate cause was the massive protests against the rigged parliamentary and presidential elections of 2011–12. The public and the authorities viewed those protests as anti-Vladimir Putin, questioning the legitimacy of his return to the presidency. In response, the regime’s domestic policies were drastically tightened, transforming Russia into an obvious police state.

For post-Soviet regimes, this turn of events is quite logical. The government (free of public control and, therefore, of any responsibility to citizens) responds to growing public tensions first and foremost through intimidation, seeking to destroy or neutralize the forces that, in the ruling elite’s opinion, provoke conflicts. These demonstrations have belied the Kremlin’s strategy of Putin’s stability.

As conceived by the regime’s spin doctors, Russia’s growing middle class, economically prosperous and patriotic, was to become a key condition for sociopolitical stability and act as the regime’s primary pillar. However, it was representatives of that very segment of society who took to the streets to protest. Once this failure was acknowledged, a radical shift in the Kremlin’s strategy has followed: instead of the “creative class,” which is the engine of modernization, the regime’s social base is now considered to be the poor and state-dependent conservative groups in the provinces.

In this chapter, I consider the social and political causes of the conservative turn chosen by the Putin regime—a strategy that could produce greater repressive control of society and the resurrection of the traditionalist great-power ideology seeking to dominate the post-Soviet space.
The Essence of the Regime

Since Putin’s ascent to power, marked by the murky story of the September 1999 explosions in Russian cities and the onset of the Second Chechen War, the style of his rule has clearly amounted to an effort to block the nation’s barely begun return to the “civilized world’s” 1990s development path. Instead, the ruling group sought to pursue a guarded conservative policy of “freezing” the nation. In Putin’s state, just like the Soviet-era state, the ruling oligarchy has started to pursue its own interests in various domains of public life, including education, youth upbringing, and the protection of morals and traditional values.

Even though it ran counter to the constitution, such an ideology reflected the understanding of reality typically shared by representatives of the Soviet system’s most essential institution, the secret political police, which now includes the nation’s ruling elite. The spirit of this institution, vested with extraordinary powers, has come to define the operations of the present-day authoritarian regime. The secret political (also known as special or extraordinary) police, which is openly exempt from the regular legal framework and governed only by secret executive acts, has established rules for other social institutions and even for the entire society.

Invisible and never discussed in public, the special services has been expressing dominant interests of the authoritarian state: society subordinate to state and the suppression of growing structural and functional differentiation of the social system and, with it, of greater autonomy of certain social strata.

It is the coercive structures (rather than representative, legal, market, or cultural institutions) that serve as systemically important and symbolic structures of “Putinism.” Governance via sublegal enforcement agencies free of public control paralyzes the processes and mechanisms of self-organization within the society, represses its diversity, and narrows down individuals’ opportunity, enterprise, and activity.

**Provinces: Status and Ideology.** Unlike the capital cities and major cities, the poor and depressed provinces depend much more on the state. They are shackled by lack of diversity, with single industries
dominating entire regions. Smaller towns and midsize cities, which in Soviet times hosted enterprises of the military-industrial complex, today find themselves in dire straits. Their populations understand that, in the absence of government contracts or subsidies, the local enterprises, burdened with backward technology and lack of competitiveness, are doomed to fail; the closure of such enterprises would be disastrous not only for the employees but also for the entire city or region, as no other sources of income have become available since the Soviet collapse.

The survival instinct forces the provincial population to defend the old system and resist any change. The people can neither forget nor forgive the reformers, whom they blame for the catastrophic collapse of living standards, loss of savings, unemployment, and months-long delays in wages in the 1990s. The process of institutional transformation dealt the heaviest blow to those who were employed in the military-industrial system and who clearly associated “economic reforms” and “democracy” with the USSR’s geopolitical defeat, an alleged Western conspiracy, and Washington policies supposedly intended to weaken and destroy America’s primary ideological and military adversary.

Paternalistic expectations are a seemingly inextinguishable vestige of Soviet ideology, which sanctions the forced consensus between the government and public. Illusions are highly persistent because people want to believe in them. The government-proclaimed order is consistent with the public’s understanding of fairness, since they are unfamiliar with any other system of relationship between the state and society. After all, three generations of Soviets had spent their lives in a centralized, planned economy with state-distributed benefits, ideological isolation, and dictatorship.

The divergence between reality and mass illusions (the split-consciousness phenomenon) has long been structured and institutionalized. On the one hand, the perceptions of high-handedness and impunity of the corrupt bureaucracy and oligarchs within the president’s inner circle, as well as of government incompetence, cause pervasive feelings of helplessness, insecurity, and deep concern over an uncertain future. Yet it is precisely this negative experience,
frustration, and vulnerability that also brings about the reliance on a strong leader capable of “bringing order across the country,” as the Russian expression goes, by purging it of the bureaucratic mafia and robber-baron capitalism to restore “social justice” in the distribution of public goods, and “equality of everyone before the law.”

**Regime: Response to Protests.** The waning legitimacy of authoritarian regimes often leads to a dictatorship, or at least an attempt to impose a dictatorship, rather than an effort to reform or democratize. Putinism has followed the former path since 2012.

Various laws the Duma enacted in 2012 and 2013 are intended to either impose government control over the activities of the nongovernment sector and civil society organizations or, should they reject such control, to discredit and destroy them. The Russian ruling class consider their activities not merely a phenomenon profoundly alien to the traditional “national culture” (perceived as a positive version of serfdom, with alleged solidarity of the rulers and the subjects blessed by the Orthodox faith), but also as “dangerous” ideas of “liberalism” and democracy that undermine the regime’s dominance.

In addition to Putin’s personal vindictiveness, the campaign to discredit public organizations is driven by a desire to suppress any associations independent of the state and purge any public organizations that could serve as a channel of Western influence, the spread of democracy, and the control of law, over the authoritarian regime.

Putin’s administration is not particularly concerned about the relatively few public protesters, or even about the political opposition and civic resistance, which are fragmented and lack access to the media—first and foremost to the national TV channels completely controlled by Kremlin bureaucrats. The pressure has been applied to the Internet and to noncommercial organizations because of their ability to effect social consolidation and provide alternative channels of influence on the population.

Within a short period of time, all major publications and media holdings saw their owners and editorial leadership replaced with individuals more loyal to the presidential administration. The Internet has also seen increased activity among paid bloggers (Kremlin
“trolls”) waging an aggressive campaign to discredit liberals and regime detractors online. As a result, urban middle-class groups with liberal leanings are effectively denied any chance for projecting information or political influence to the provinces (midsize and small cities, towns, and villages) that are home to two-thirds of the nation’s population.

**Regime: Propaganda.** Putin has lost the support of the urban middle class of larger cities, and he does not expect to win it back. But he cannot allow the provinces to become unmanageable: this would spell the end of the entire government system he has built. By publicly articulating social and legal problems brought about by dysfunctional aspects of the command-and-control bureaucratic micromanagement, public protests undermine the very foundation of the authoritarian regime’s legitimacy and destroy statist and paternalist illusions of the conservative electorate that still serves as Putinism’s social base. Therefore, by tightening media and Internet censorship and introducing severe penalties for extremism and libel against the authorities, the regime seeks to discredit civil society organizations and liberal ideology and neutralize any channels through which they could influence the provinces.

Even though open criticism of corruption, administrative arbitrariness, and abuses by federal and local authorities—coupled with human rights advocacy—are unable to change the social order, they destroy the hopes of the population in the provinces that Putin’s Russia will be able to pursue the policies declared by the regime as key priorities: “support” of and “care” for citizens (to use the language of the government propaganda), guaranteed jobs and accessible housing, free health and education, and above-poverty pensions.

Ideologically, no other domestic justifications exist for Putin’s system of domination. Another dimension of the same collective myth includes the hugely important theme of “Russia’s rebirth as a great power.” The reproduction of authoritarian institutions goes hand-in-hand with the imitation of a Soviet grand-imperial style: it requires repeated confirmation that present-day Russia still holds the geopolitical positions that the USSR used to enjoy—hence, the excessive
military expenditures (in the absence of substantial modernization or reform of the military); pompous, tsarist-style ceremonies in the Kremlin; grand, stately receptions in palaces; and huge expenses on the Sochi Olympics and various summits. The ubiquitous propaganda keeps pounding in the heads of the “masses” that Putin alone is to thank for Russia’s having regained its influence around the world and gained respect in international affairs. Political ads endlessly play various versions of the same tune, one more compatible with North Korea than a country that deems itself European. The global community has recognized Putin as a highly influential, if not the most influential, and successful leader in the modern world.

The power of propaganda in an information space with no alternatives cannot be denied. An authoritarian national leader recognized by the masses symbolically compensates for the national inferiority complex stemming from the Soviet Union’s collapse. Identification with such a leader softens the trauma and frustration of the public mind-set of Russian society, especially in the provinces that perceive Russia’s transition to a free-market economy as the wholesale destruction of their way of life.

The Putin regime (and similar authoritarian regimes that lack legitimate mechanisms for changing the government) does not seek anything beyond a semblance of public consensus. The shortage of legitimacy is offset by “lawful” use of force, which has become possible thanks to the executive’s de facto control of the judiciary. That such law enforcement entails violations of the constitution and of previously enacted laws is ignored by the legal community, since there are no institutional mechanisms to ensure fairness or justice. In opinion polling data, 80–85 percent of the population believes that a conflict in which the interests of an ordinary person and the state (or any official) collide is a priori lost by the former.3

Putin’s administration feels quite content with the political passivity of the public and with the patience and opportunism of the population.4 The Kremlin interprets the absence of protest or resistance to its arbitrary rule as mass endorsement of the regime. Meanwhile, a fairly sizable percentage of the nation (roughly 30–35 percent) is concerned with the critical situation in the social sphere regarding
health care, housing and utilities, and deterioration of rural roads. However, since such discontent is mostly typical of politically weak groups on the social periphery—residents of towns, villages, and underprivileged sections of mid-size cities where the level of self-organization is close to zero—it poses little danger to the regime. On the contrary, it strengthens the state’s ideological paternalism by switching the onus from the top to other levels of government.

Society: Mass Perception of the Regime and Support Dynamics. Popular support for Putin is based primarily on consumption growth. However, the leader’s popularity as a function of the people’s economic position and income is nonlinear. A more important aspect here was a belief that such a state of affairs would continue indefinitely because the power remained in the same pair of hands.

The vast majority of the population (not only in the provinces, but also in megacities) was unconcerned about overt restrictions of human rights and freedoms, suppression of weak democratic institutions, sham elections, corruption, and other flaws of authoritarian rule. The leitmotif ran something like this: Putin is our hope, for who but not he could get things done? There is no alternative to him, so let him rule on as long as the kind of crises the country survived in the 1990s do not recur. Before 2010, the share of those unhappy with and opposed to Putin’s policies never exceeded 7–10 percent, whereas the share of those approving of and trusting him stood at 84–87 percent (figure 1).

The economic crisis of 2008–09 signaled that the resources and capabilities available to such a system of governance are clearly limited; moreover, they keep shrinking.

Even when the adverse effects of the crisis became a thing of the past, household income growth slowed down and, as of 2012, stopped: first, among the more successful and wealthy groups, such as the middle class in the capitals and major cities, and then, in 2013, among provincial households. Despite high oil prices, the national economy slipped into a recession fraught with lengthy stagnation and even a downturn, which constrained government expenditures and, therefore, the government’s ability to buy mass loyalty.
Meanwhile, the vast majority still expects their incomes to grow and, therefore, looks for explanations for why there is no improvement. The simplest and, therefore, most frequent explanations include egotism of corrupt officials, greed of the president’s inner circle, and crony capitalism. For a long while, Putin was not seen as being responsible for the situation in the economy and other areas. Instead, the blame was assigned to the state officials and local authorities. However, since 2010–11, this mechanism for relieving the national leader of responsibility has increasingly faltered, and, judging by the polling data, it no longer worked in 2013. As a result, the president’s popularity was steadily declining. While Putin’s approval rating remained high (holding steady throughout 2013 at 62–65 percent), the percentage share of his opponents climbed, reaching 34–36 percent over the same period.

Both hardcore proponents and opponents are on the political fringes. The mass indifference in politics and alienation from public life ought
to be recognized as the core structure of his authoritarian dominance (table 1). The huge share of indifferent responses regarding attitudes toward Putin has averaged 49–52 percent throughout his rule.

The erosion of trust in the government depresses mass expectations for the future, while opinions regarding the nation’s situation overall are turning ever more pessimistic. However, delegitimization of the existing authorities does not in itself engender a new ideology of relations between society and state nor bring about new political or legal concepts. For the ideas of a law-bound state and democratic system to emerge, be received by the masses, and translate into motivation for one’s active participation in politics and civic responsibility, there have to be present popular groups of intellectuals and independent and respected elites. In the absence of such groups,
delegitimization of power promotes widespread immorality and cynicism, as well as a firm belief in general venality and corruption that afflict the entire society, including those at the very top. (See tables 2 and 3.)

Thus, in August 2013, only 13 percent flatly rejected any suspicions of Putin’s moral crookedness, abuse of power, or criminal financial machinations; a majority of the respondents readily admitted negative opinions about top government officials. People lacked sufficient information to confidently describe Putin as corrupt, yet they freely accepted rumors to that effect, believing that everyone steals in Russia. Putin was perceived as part and parcel of the system, or just one of the numerous high officials who have managed to make their way to the treasury feeding trough. Thus, they do not consider it really important if the powers that be are corrupt; the key point is that the respondents’ lives have improved under Putin.

In these surveys, not only did the ratings of the nation’s top leadership plummet, but Russia’s political class, or rather the entire
political system associated with Putin, was also viewed in undeniably negative terms. The Putin regime has suppressed free political competition and fair transparent elections, and thus the public perceives the regime's institutions as, in effect, a product of negative selection designed to promote cynics, social climbers, and people free of morals, so long as they are loyal to the government (tables 4 and 5).

The party system—which, with great effort, has been assembled from regional electoral machines, corrupted, and run by the Kremlin—has clearly failed to achieve the objectives that Putin's administration had set for it, including securing public consensus. Any ideological differences between political parties granted access to the State Duma have been completely erased. Parties, which used

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do You Think V. Putin Is Guilty of the Power Abuse that His Opponents Accuse Him Of?</th>
<th>April 2012</th>
<th>December 2012</th>
<th>August 2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He is clearly guilty, as evidenced by numerous facts cited in the Internet and by free media</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He is probably guilty, just like all high officials, but this is something I know little of, as I do not monitor such issues</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Even if it is true, the more important thing is that, under him, the nation's life has improved</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whatever they say, I do not believe that Putin has ever abused power</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: In percentage of those polled, N=1,600.
to serve as social mobility channels for regional officials and business representatives seeking access to government resources or bureaucratic support (krysha), can no longer play that role. (Such effect was only possible during Putinism’s initial development phase, whereas the system later unavoidably turned sclerotic.)

The irreparable damage to the reputation of the governing party, United Russia, along with the system of managed elections, accounted for a slowly advancing political crisis of the regime. The impossibility of free competition among political parties—and thus

### Table 3
**Current Government**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>February 2006</th>
<th>February 2010</th>
<th>January 2012</th>
<th>August 2012</th>
<th>April 2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National prosperity</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation and consolidation of their power</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Would You Agree that a System of Uniform Cover-Up of Misdeeds by Government Officials and the Avoidance of Responsibility Has Evolved in Russia among the People in Power?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>April 2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definitely agree + rather agree</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rather disagree + definitely disagree</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N=1,600, percentage of the number polled.
of the national debate about strategies and programs of the nation’s development—along with the censorship of the key TV channels make elections meaningless in terms of representing the interests of the society.

As press and online media keep revealing abuse by top officials and politicians—shady dealings with government property, fraudulent tax returns, suspicious origins of wealth of some influential deputies, or plagiarism in dissertations for advanced academic decrees—such information solidifies in the public mind the stereotype of a complete decay of state power. In March 2013, more than 80 percent of all respondents thought so.

Regime and Society: Scenarios to 2018

Regime. The regime attempts to make up for the sterilization of politics—including suppression of political competition, censorship, electoral fraud, use of administrative leverage, and blackmail—with
### Table 5

**Perception of Politicians in Russia**

*Which of the Following Features Are, in Your Opinion, Most Typical of Most Russian Politicians Today?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lust for power, whatever dirty means it may take</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-interest</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disrespect of regular citizens</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disregard for laws</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dishonesty, lack of integrity</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immorality</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incompetence</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loathing of Russia</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stupidity</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High intellect</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High professionalism</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong willpower</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of will</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love for Russia</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty, integrity</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to only obtain power through fair democratic means</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for common citizens</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruism</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strict compliance with the law</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High morals</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheism</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in God</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: January 2014; N=1,600.*

fake traditionalism, the promotion of Russia’s “special path,” and other ideological surrogates. At the same time, the regime’s policy toward opposition is built around a simple thesis that any politics and politicians are naturally immoral and are fighting for power only for the sake of power. The regime teaches, “They are as unprincipled as we are, but we are ‘ours’ and they are ‘foreign.’” Thus, the regime leads the general public to believe there is no alternative to the ruling elite. Today, this is the key argument in favor of preserving the authoritarian regime.

Another tactic is the affirmation of Russia’s “complete sovereignty,” whereby the Constitutional Court and the parliament rule that its national law prevails over international law. This is tantamount to declaring a dictatorship. Putin’s inner circle includes numerous actors willing to support such a policy. The government is doomed to slow degradation, as it has to incur an ever greater cost to keep the lid on the swelling discontent and social protest. The decay of the authoritarian and corrupt system will continue until it breaks down, as conflicts of interests flare up among various groups of the ruling elite.

Society. The majority of the Russian public rejects pointed opposition to Putinism. For instance, only 21 percent support such opposition slogans as “Russia without Putin”; “Putin must go”; or, as seen in 2011–12 protest demonstrations, “Putin is a thief; Put Putin behind bars,” as opposed to 63 percent against such slogans or actions. In other words, the nature of the Russian government and the very construct of its political system are beyond discussion or change for half the population.

Furthermore, no collective political or social actor, such as a movement or a party, exists today that would anchor its position in politics as a consistent and institutionalized activity. More than half of respondents (55–65 percent) agree that the existing system of political parties, trade unions, and civil society organizations neither reflects nor represents popular interests. As a result, so long as the situation continues, there will be no institutional engine for change. Thus, the expectations shared by those longing for a change in Russia’s existing
order that the pending economic crisis will detonate an explosion of mass discontent, making Putin’s ousting inevitable and bringing a new reform cycle in Russia, appear to be overly optimistic.¹⁰

Instead, one could attempt to outline certain alternative evolutionary paths for the Putinist system. The first and likeliest case, as I have described, involves a lengthy and slow decay that combines occasional crackdowns and “liberalization” phases, driven solely by tactical considerations of retaining power. Zero growth or even decline in the population’s living standards would not result in mass protest (such as Ukraine’s Euromaidan) that could split the elite and security agencies, causing a government crisis and Putin’s resignation. However, middle-class protest rallies would continue. Today, the regime has sufficient resources to contain such protests.

Using his administrative leverage, “creative accounting,” and various fraudulent techniques, Putin will win the presidential race of 2018, notwithstanding likely and numerous scandals, loss of face, and perhaps lost mass support. However, thereafter, he will face a powerful and united resistance movement and be forced to leave office, and the entire loyalty system he has built will collapse at once.

In January 2014 opinion polls, only 29 percent of those eligible and willing to vote were ready to back Putin’s next presidential bid.¹¹ At the time, roughly half the respondents said they would like to see him struck off the candidates list for the next election so that the competition could unfold among completely different actors unaffiliated with any of the current parties.¹² Still, Putin would be elected in either the first round or a runoff. An alternative version of this scenario would include a rerun of “Operation Successor,” whereby Putin, feeling that his own electoral chances were problematic, nominates a weak surrogate “democrat” from his team while retaining key levers of power, as he did with Dimitri Medvedev in 2008.

In yet another, less-probable scenario, significant deterioration of the economic situation ahead of the next parliamentary election in 2015 would exacerbate tensions in the provinces and trigger numerous falling-outs and conflicts between federal officials (centrally appointed governors) and local authorities closely involved with
local business interests. The first signs of such conflicts have already occurred in major cities such as Yekaterinburg, Petrozavodsk, and Novosibirsk. Putin’s administration would lose control of the situation in a number of regions, making the use of administrative leverage for the 2018 presidential election problematic.

As a result, informal blocs and party associations hurriedly cobbled together by the opposition might be successful if they are able to coordinate their actions and develop a common program. This would most likely be an amorphous and opportunistic union of democrats, liberals, and “national democrats” (whose nationalism is of a largely anti-imperial hue) with various populist groups that oppose Putinism (leftists, antifascists, human rights advocates, and so on). Their victories, however, are likely to take place only in selected regions and, while significantly weakening the centralized political system, may not be enough to change it entirely.

Finally, there is a third, rather fantastical, scenario. Putin leaves office as a result of some extraordinary events, and the regime he created starts to collapse because of infighting among various clans and groups. One such group appeals to the people; demands restoration of the rule of law and freedom from censorship; calls for a repeal of the repressive laws enacted in 2011–14; pushes for an independent judiciary and integration with the European Union, among other domestic and foreign policy reforms; and, having tipped the balance slightly in its favor, radically completes all institutional reforms required to achieve democratic transition.

Perhaps three or four circumstances are capable of provoking such a turning point:

1. The total destruction of the banking-financial system of Russia induces continuing or even strengthening sanctions from Western countries, in conjunction with a sustained drop in oil prices (and perhaps a ban on the use of the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication system in Russia). This chain of events leads to the bankruptcy of a wide range of industries and state-owned companies (the “purse” of the regime) and then to total paralysis of the economy and
financial collapse of the Russian state (like the 1998 “default”). This is followed by mass unemployment, contraction of business activity, depreciation of savings provided to sections of the population, and so on. If such a situation continues for more than two years, Putin would not hold onto power.

2. Certain kinds of actions by Putin (for example, international blackmail or provoking military tensions, frequent incidents with NATO armed forces, and balancing between cold and “hot” war) lead to a radical confrontation with the West—not simply to a strengthening of sanctions, but rather to a total freeze of assets held by Russian oligarchs and companies in the West, termination of economic ties with Russia, confiscation of Russian property, and labeling Russia as an aggressor and war criminal country. This results in the total isolation of Russia along the lines of North Korea.

3. The escalation of armed conflict between opposing sides begins in Ukraine, “forcing” Putin to directly and openly introduce the Russian army into Ukraine’s eastern and southern regions. One could expect some sort of previously inconceivable war adventure (for example, an attack on Kiev and the seizure of central Ukraine, with the subsequent annexation of the eastern and southern regions to Russia).

But Putin’s power is not enough to hold onto the occupied territories. Stuck in this position for a long time, Russia finds itself in a state of total isolation with the prospect of rapid industrial deterioration (particularly in a context of intensifying sanctions and a ban on the import of new technology) and devaluation of property accumulated by elites. The impossibility of quickly addressing the problem of establishing control over Ukraine (which is totally unrealistic, as the experience of the Chechen war demonstrates) is equivalent to a military defeat and a loss of face for Putin, and evidence of his political inadequacy, loss of popular support, and erosion of power.
4. Putin’s serious illness renders him unable to maintain his grip on power, and he transfers his authority to a weak successor appointed by him. During a rapidly developing, wide-ranging crisis (foreign policy, economic, and military), the successor loses influence and the ability to control interclan conflicts within the upper echelons of power. The new leader is deposed, beginning the crucial phase of the struggle for power.

**Conclusion**

Detailed in this paper is the public opinion dynamic that shaped the regime’s policies after 2012. Facing an unmistakable decline in Putin’s popularity (which, given the across-the-board negative ratings of the authorities is the regime’s only claim to legitimacy), the government has responded with policies of social conservatism, repression, “sterilization of politics,” and “a war on civil society.”

While these policies may well have worked to stabilize (or “freeze”) the situation in the medium, or perhaps even long, term, the economic crisis could erode the central authority and lead to either a sudden collapse or a slow but lethal decay, resulting in the gradual subversion of the elite’s loyalty to Putin or even force his resignation or removal from office under circumstances still highly improbable but not impossible.

**Notes**

1. These include the Dima Yakovlev Act, enacted in response to the Magnitsky Act in the US; the Foreign Agents Registration Act; the Libel Act; the Extremism Act, which de facto bans criticism of deputies or high officials and legalizes censorship in the media and Internet; the Official Secrets Act; and a law criminalizing “separatism.”


4. As Juan Linz and Hannah Arendt have demonstrated, in authoritarian regimes apathy, nostalgia for the old ways or pseudo-traditionalism, and political indifference equal mass support. See, for example, Juan J. Linz. Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000).


7. In two years (April 2011 through April 2013), the number of Russian respondents who recognized it as a party of “crooks and thieves” grew from 30 to 51 percent and then declined to 45 percent by Fall 2013, remaining steady thereafter.

8. See Valery Zorkin, “Predel ustupchivosti” [Yield Limit], Rossiyskaya Gazeta, October 29, 2010, www.rg.ru/2010/10/29/zorkin.html. This is a presentation Valery Zorkin, the chairman of the Constitutional Court, gave regarding the need to reconsider the priority of international law over domestic laws.

9. The figure cited is the average of all Levada Center polls in 2011–12. The calculations were made by the author. See “Rossiyane o lozunge ‘Rossiya bez Putina’” [Russians on the Slogan “Russia without
10. While I do not deny the possibility of such a scenario, such explanation does resemble the rhetorical figure of *deux ex machina* as it transposes, to the irrational status of such “crisis,” all shortcomings that stem from inadequate analysis of social forces and organizations that would be capable of first advancing a political program that is clear and convincing to the masses and then implementing it through day-to-day political efforts.


12. The annexation of Crimea has triggered a “patriotic upsurge” and mass consolidation around the government. Both the former and latter would have been impossible without the impact of propaganda unprecedented in aggressiveness and scale (“Russia has returned to its traditional role as a great power that gathers territories and lands, rather than loses them, the way it did back in the 1990s”). Public approval for actions of national leadership comes close to values recorded in August–September 2008 during the Russia-Georgia war. However, society cannot remain in such an “agitated” state for long; as experience shows, support for the government will soon begin to decline because of tangible economic deterioration. Social indicators of mass stress, economic pessimism, and concerns that are driven by falling standards of living, stagnating output, and inflation, for example, remain on the level observed before the events in Crimea or Eastern Ukraine.
Evolution of Values and Political Sentiment in Moscow and the Provinces

MIKHAIL DMITRIEV

The dynamic development of Russia’s economy in the 2000s brought about an unprecedented improvement in the country’s standard of living that affected all population groups. Real household incomes grew by a factor of 2.5, while wages and salaries more than tripled. In the social domain, this was a period of relative stability as changes in values and sociopolitical attitudes could not keep up with economic growth. In politics, this initially led to substantial growth in Vladimir Putin’s and United Russia’s approval ratings and then, post-2006, brought about a lengthy period of electoral equilibrium when Putin and, subsequently, Dmitry Medvedev were approved by more than two-thirds of the samples in public opinion surveys.

However, a critical mass of changes had accumulated by the early 2010s. The economic crisis of 2008–09 led to mass protests, initially driven by economic reasons, and then in 2011–12, political motivation came into play. This lengthy period of electoral equilibrium ended in 2011. For the next 18 months, approval ratings of the Russian leadership and the United Russia party dropped by about 20 percentage points. In addition, a demand for democratization arose. At first, it largely only affected Moscow and other major cities, yet by the end of 2013, demand for more democracy was stronger nationwide compared to in the capital.\(^1\)
The First Wave of Protests

The first wave of mass protests occurred in 2010 as the impact of the economic crisis set in. Almost 34,000 protest events occurred across a vast territory and concerned local economic problems, mostly unemployment and back wages. Oftentimes, grievances were addressed to local authorities rather than to the central government. Political demands were rare and, if anything, took a back seat. Most protests occurred in small and midsized cities.

These protests reflected the dominant role of the so-called “survival-related values.” According to a 2002 poll conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation, the highest percentage of households (33 percent) prioritized income and current consumption, including wages, salaries, and social benefits. By contrast, only around 4 percent of respondents were concerned with social services, including health and education, and only 2 percent referred to housing and utilities issues. This priority mix was also typical of Moscow, even though it enjoyed a much more favorable economic position.

However, by the early 2010s the process of social modernization fostered by the precrisis improvement in living standards was finding an ever stronger manifestation in the public mindset. Early signs of such changes could be found in the growing strength of the urban middle class that, before the 2008 economic crisis, accounted for roughly one-third of the adult population and more than half of the population in major cities. In her research, Natalya Tikhonova has demonstrated that the middle class typically exhibited more modernized attitudes compared to other socioeconomic groups.

Such attitudes included placing a high value on “self-realization” (that is, the ability to successfully choose one’s path in life), freedom, achievement, greater tolerance, acknowledgement of the plurality of individual interests, the understanding of democracy as a method of securing the pluralism of interests, the inner loci of control (as opposed to those imposed from the outside), a tendency to attribute one’s successes and failures to one’s own actions rather than external factors, individualism and nonconformism, and human rights
as a priority. The demand for a lawful state increased, paternalistic attitudes toward the state weakened, and pro-European orientations gained strength.

Furthermore, in late 2010, opinion poll data first revealed a link between the middle class and predisposition toward protest attitudes.\(^5\) Whereas across the entire sample and among Moscow’s female residents protest attitudes grew as income fell, protest attitudes among Moscow’s male residents peaked among high earners. In addition to focus-group data that indicated growing tensions in major cities, these findings indicated the likely onset of a downward trend in the government’s approval ratings, along with potential mass protests at election time. Initially, experts were quite skeptical about this prediction, but it had come true by late 2011.

It is these very attitudes that found expression in protests over falsified elections in Moscow and other major cities in 2011–12. The protests marked a sort of climax in the social polarization process: modernized values and priorities typical of a growing middle class started to diverge from the more rationalist attitudes of other demographic groups. The following section details some of the key factors contributing to the change in values and, consequently, in political attitudes.

**Factors Contributing to Changing Values and Political Attitudes**

Over the last 10 years, real incomes of Russians have more than doubled, and the Russia–Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development income gap was considerably reduced.\(^6\) By 2010, the share of households living below the poverty line dropped from 29 percent to 14 percent, whereas the percentage of persons living on less than $2.15 a day, in purchasing-parity terms, plummeted more than 10-fold, from 8.3 percent to 0.9 percent.\(^7\) As a result, the consumption gap between poor and nonpoor households began to rapidly close.

The convergence in durable goods purchases was especially impressive. Between 2005 and 2010, the gap in car ownership
between the top 10 percent of earners and the bottom 10 percent narrowed from a factor of 2.5 to 1.6, and the gap in personal-computer ownership between these two groups shrank from 3.3 to 1.4. As to other durable goods (such as TV sets, refrigerators, and washing machines), there is hardly any gap left. In addition to growing incomes, the convergence was fueled by improved availability of consumer credit. In 2011, 20 percent of poor households and 30 percent of nonpoor households had outstanding loans.

The consumption convergence may have led to the displacement of survival values by values associated with human development outside the middle class. In Center for Strategic Research poll data, this change first surfaced in the first half of 2012. Such priorities as incomes, current consumption, and social benefits dropped to the bottom of the list, whereas the issues of housing and utilities, discontent with corruption, education, health, personal security, and equality before the law moved to the top. This was observed in both Moscow and other regions.

However, this transformation of values and preferences was nonlinear. As the old value equilibrium broke down, attitudes entered an unstable transition fraught with sudden and unpredictable short-term priority swings. Secondary factors, such as official propaganda via national TV channels, may have had as much of an impact as fundamental socioeconomic changes. During Medvedev’s presidency, official ideology paid extra attention to such issues as modernization, housing development, education, health, and law enforcement reform. Most of these issues were addressed in high-priority national projects. Therefore, the official ideology and propaganda, which at the time tended to shift the public’s focus from survival values to human development, may have become somewhat aligned with objective socioeconomic change.

Public values and preferences in Moscow continued to diverge from those of Russia’s other regions. 2013 opinion polls showed that, in terms of socioeconomic attitudes, Moscow was the most modern city in the country, whereas outside Moscow the public had partially reverted to old priorities revolving around survival values. Those changes coincided with the “conservative wave”
shift in official ideology following Putin’s election. Muscovites’ (Moscow residents’) greater imperviousness to the campaign, broadcasted by the state-controlled media, could have been due to the greater role played by independent channels of information in Moscow and, at least partly, to Moscow’s greater advances in fundamental metrics of socioeconomic development, making its value changes more sustainable.

While outside the capital the most pressing problem in 2013, just like in the early 2000s, was poverty and pauperization (41 percent of all respondents characterized this as the top issue)—with price inflation second (36 percent)—in Moscow many fewer respondents were concerned with those issues (23 percent and 11 percent, respectively). Similarly, growing unemployment was a far lower priority for Moscow’s residents, at 14 percent, whereas the nationwide average was 23 percent.

While 64 percent of all Russian residents reported being unhappy about their wages or salaries, only 37 percent of Moscow’s residents felt that way. Instead, their main concerns included crises of morals, culture, and ethics (45 percent in Moscow versus 28 percent nationwide); lack of personal safety (38 percent versus 27 percent); lack of access to many types of health care services (37 percent versus 28 percent); lack of respect for personal rights and freedoms (36 percent versus 27 percent); and the state of the environment (14 percent versus 8 percent).

The difference in attitudes and values changes inside and outside Moscow will have a crucial impact on the evolving demand for political change. In Moscow, for the foreseeable future, such demand will largely come from a politically active minority willing to take part in street protests and interested in sociopolitical modernization. The city’s activities will spike at the time of regional and federal elections. In contrast, outside Moscow the demand for change and protest activities will be largely driven by the economic situation and will intensify as the economy worsens. The most serious risks to the political status quo will arise if protest activities in and outside Moscow at some point gel into a broader movement advancing both political and economic demands.
In 2013, the demand for political change started shifting to other regions. At times, other regions even surpassed Moscow in their aspirations. Thus, a political system other than free democracy was the preferred option for 46 percent of Moscow’s residents, but for only 32 percent nationwide. The greatest demand for free democracy was exhibited by St. Petersburg (69 percent) and other cities with more than 1 million people (59 percent). Even in smaller cities and rural areas where the modern middle class comprises an insignificant proportion of the population, the demand for democracy reached 38–39 percent, thus exceeding the national capital’s level. Similarly, the share of Muscovites who voted for United Russia stood at 74 percent, compared to 67 percent across Russia.\textsuperscript{10}

By 2013, similar trends also affected attitudes toward public protests. While in 2011 Moscow led the protests against unfair elections, in mid-2013 only 21 percent of Moscow’s residents were willing to protest an unfair election, compared to 26–30 percent of residents in cities with less than 1 million people and to 25 percent of rural residents. The gap in willingness to take part in economic protests was even more drastic, with 15 percent in Moscow versus a 43 percent nationwide average and 63 percent in cities with more than 1 million people. Moreover, as the share of Muscovites supporting legislative restrictions on street protests exceeded the percentage opposing such restrictions, three-quarters of all respondents across Russia opposed the law.\textsuperscript{11} Thus, in a brief span of time Moscow appeared to have lost its role as leader of the campaign for political change, while its middle class morphed into a kind of anchor for the political status quo.

\textbf{Conclusion}

To sum up, social values and priorities have been shifting from the traditionalist model to a more modern framework. These tendencies stemmed from a rapid rise in living standards across all sections of society. The 2010–13 income growth slowdown, combined with a changed mix of values and priorities, brought about a turnaround in political sentiment. Popular support for political
leaders visibly declined. Attitudes toward the existing political system have become more critical, and the demand for democratization has been turning into a prevailing attitude, especially outside Moscow.

As opposed to the previous decade, it is not the growing middle class but, rather, other demographic groups that are becoming the key engine of democratization demand. Outside of the middle class, the demand for political change is mainly propelled by the absence of economic reform. The government’s inability to speed up economic growth, and significant risks of economic slowdown leading to another recession, make plausible the end of the relative political equilibrium that followed the 2012 presidential election. A sharp change in political attitudes will require the authorities to adopt tactics necessary to retain political control. However, a number of new problems may complicate the attainment of this goal.

A deteriorating economy will trigger new protest waves. In the event of stagnation or low positive growth across Russia, growth in several dozen regions could be negative, which would likely cause local protests that, among other things, would feature political demands. In the past, the authorities sought to address economic protests by throwing Reserve Fund resources at them. However, continued use of such techniques will be constrained by a shrinking Reserve Fund and by protesters’ diverse motives and highly politicized attitudes.

Unlike the 2010 protests, economically motivated protests are likely to go hand in hand with political demands and a growing desire to see new political leaders in power. Thanks to a greater political component, economic protests in the provinces might catalyze the activities of the pro-protest minority in Moscow, for which political motives trump economic grievances. Reasons for protests in Moscow may, in addition to protests in other regions, include electoral events (such as presidential elections and elections to the Moscow City Duma and the State Duma). Interethnic frictions and conflicts might act as further protest triggers in Moscow and elsewhere. Therefore, broader and more convoluted protest coalitions might arise compared to those seen during the economic protests.
of 2010 and the political protests of 2011. Of course, the existing potential for economic protest will be realized to the greatest extent should a full-blown economic crisis occur, bringing with it lower incomes and rising unemployment.

Another problem impeding the authorities’ tactical adaptation to new economic realities involves the waning influence of official TV. Focus groups held in December 2013 showed stronger mistrust toward national TV channels, particularly outside Moscow. In various provinces, respondents mentioned watching independent news channels—something that had not been previously mentioned in focus groups. According to a late-2013 opinion poll by WCIOM in a number of provinces across European Russia (the area West of the Ural Mountains), respondents trusted TV less than other media: twenty-seven percent of all respondents said they trusted TV as a news source, compared to 30 percent for specialized websites and newswires, 33 percent for radio, and 35 percent for print periodicals.

However, since the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, public attention has shifted almost instantaneously to a foreign policy agenda. Official TV coverage of the Ukrainian events appeared to be consonant with the sentiments of the Russian public. According to Levada Center polls, the overwhelming majority of Russians at that time fully trusted central TV channels on the subject of Ukraine and did not even attempt to search for alternative sources of information.

However, this dramatic departure from the previous trend may be rather short lived. When economic crisis erupted at the end of 2014 and the ruble depreciated by more than 50 percent, official TV failed to effectively address economic issues. It tried to downplay the problems to sustain an overoptimistic economic outlook, which proved to be utterly unrealistic. Public confidence in TV as a trustworthy source of economic information began to erode once again. Further perpetuation of the economic crisis is likely to revive Russians’ preference for alternative media.

At this time, however, the complex configurations of potential protest coalitions pose extra risks to political development, as any broad and diverse coalition likely to take shape will have far from all of its members sharing the values and priorities of modernization.
A combination of survival mentality, hostility toward ethnic minorities, and anti-Western attitudes could tinge protest activities in the populist, leftist, and nationalist hues typical of many Latin American countries.

Finally, one cannot be confident that the period of a dynamic and inconsistent shift in priorities is over. On the contrary, there are many reasons to believe that current attitudes remain transitional and even fickle. Progress and regress replace one another in a kaleidoscopic fashion, sometimes occurring simultaneously. This means that the evolving mass consciousness might still present quite a few surprises by 2018.

Notes


10. These data are consistent with an overall trend observed in the former Communist countries where, in recent years, mass-scale demand for democracy arose among non-middle-class demographics. According to a two-round opinion poll conducted by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) across 34 European nations in 2006 and 2010, the share of democracy supporters between the two poll rounds grew substantially in Tajikistan, Armenia, Uzbekistan, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Belarus, even though in some of these countries the middle class does not amount to a sizable population group. In a number of cases, the figures improved by roughly 50 to 100 percent; according to the EBRD, the demand for democracy declined specifically in the European Union. As a result of these mixed changes, support for democracy in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, according to the 2010 EBRD data, exceeded the relevant figures seen in France, the United Kingdom, and Germany.

Triumphs and Crises of Plebiscitary Presidentialism

KIRILL ROGOV

The annexation of Crimea undoubtedly marked yet another turning point in Russian history. Vladimir Putin's move may well be compared to the Soviet military's invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The Politburo in Moscow saw the victory of a progressive party within the Czech communist leadership as a critical threat to the entire Soviet regime, not just in terms of preserving its sphere of influence but also in the context of an internal rift between the “progressivists” and the “neo-Stalinists” within the Soviet elite, brought about by Nikita Khrushchev’s “thaw.” Therefore, the military invasion of Czechoslovakia was not just a strike against a mutinous fringe but also the final resolution of this latent standoff in favor of the hardliners, guided by the doctrine of opposition to the West.

Similarly, Putin understood the pro-European revolution in Ukraine not only as a Western invasion of what the Kremlin considered to be within its sphere of influence, but also in the context of signs of internal political instability that were manifest in Russia in 2011–12. The Ukrainian revolution became yet another case of a post-Soviet regime's collapse, pointing again to the inherent weaknesses of such regimes as well as to the threats that pro-Western sentiments of the populace and the elites pose to them. Like in the 1960s, the resolute turn was preceded by a period of tightening the screws at home to weaken the public influence of the “modernization” party. Therefore, just like how the invasion of Czechoslovakia along with the associated conservative turn and Cold War ideology created the conditions for “freezing” the Communist system for more
than a decade and a half, incumbent Kremlin strategists believe that the annexation of Crimea, suppression of internal opposition, and relapse of a limited Cold War should guarantee Putin a decade of new “stability” based on the threat of domestic and foreign enemies and Putin’s willingness to confront them.

The signs of an internal political crisis in 2011–12 and Russia’s annexation of Crimea spelled the end for the relatively mild electoral authoritarianism of the 2000s that, in its heyday, was characterized by a high level of public support for the regime and considerable economic achievements. In this chapter, I describe the mechanisms that secured stability for the Putin regime for almost 12 years and the threats that it perceived as serious enough to require a radical revision of the equilibrium in both domestic and foreign affairs. In particular, the Kremlin declared an all-out conflict with the West in spite of the obviously considerable associated risks and costs.

Plebiscitary Presidency and Stable Supermajority

Putin’s popularity is undoubtedly one of the keys to understanding the political stabilization that began in Russia in the 2000s and the mechanisms underpinning the political regime’s evolution during those years. The share of those who supported Boris Yeltsin as president of Russia in 1993–96 was anywhere between 6 percent and 45 percent and averaged out to 23.6 percent, while in the case of Putin in 2000–13, the range was 62–88 percent and the average was 73.9 percent. Clearly, so significant a difference indicates radically different systems of political interactions within the same constitutional framework.

It would be naïve to view Putin’s extreme and sustained popularity purely as a function of his personal qualities and charisma. It would make more sense to assume that we are dealing with some kind of systemic phenomenon deeply connected with the specific attributes of political demands on the part of society on the one hand, and the institutional environment of a hybrid regime on the other.

Indeed, as he climbed up the political Olympus, Putin did not look one bit like a classical charismatic leader. The cornerstone of
his image was the resolve he demonstrated in instilling order first in Chechnya and then in the rest of Russia. In this sense, he personified the stabilizing function of the state.

If comparisons are to be made, the phenomenon of Putin’s popularity makes one think back to the “delegative democracy” described by Guillermo O’Donnell using the example of Latin American countries.¹ To slightly paraphrase O’Donnell’s definition, a rather low level of confidence in most institutions—declared in democratic constitutions but not rooted in a well-developed local political tradition like parliament, political parties, separation of powers, or an independent judiciary—is compensated for by a high level of confidence in the president, or rather the office of the president, bordering on affection. It is not so much a leader-driven (vozhdisistskiy) regime as a truncated system of political institutions: the presidency becomes plebiscitary, with the president receiving a mandate (based on a statute or an understanding) to effectively broaden his constitutional powers designed (as the public believes) to make up for the failures of other institutions.²

A popular leader essentially makes the presidential office look like the only legitimate political institution in the eyes of the public. This plebiscitarism dismantles “horizontal accountability,” which O’Donnell considers the main feature of delegative democracy. This process also explains why most of the public does not see any threat to democracy or to their rights in a situation of superpresidential rule, despite the clear erosion of political competition.³

In a nutshell, the hypothesis of “delegative” or “plebiscitary” presidentialism boils down to the assumption that a high level of trust in the president can be at least partially explained by the low confidence in other public, political, and government institutions typical of hybrid regimes. However, the question remains how some presidents manage to consolidate this confidence while others fail to do so.

The special role of Putin’s higher-than-normal approval rating in the evolution of Russia’s political system has been discussed on numerous occasions. Ample statistics have been used to demonstrate that economic factors are the primary drivers of support for Putin:
the argument goes that any changes in his polling are best explained by changes in the perception of the current economic situation.\footnote{4} Undoubtedly, Putin’s sustained superpopularity is inseparable from Russia’s successful economic performance in the 2000s. However, another component of Putin’s popularity cannot be attributed to economic factors.

Before the annexation of Crimea, Putin’s approval rating reached its peak in the first months of 2000, when his job performance was approved of by more than 80 percent of those polled. Although confidence in the Russian economy had improved throughout 1999, the explosive growth of his popularity during that period substantially differed from responses to improvements in economic performance during other periods; in most cases, such a change tended to be gradual, not explosive.

Also of note is the spike in the expectation indexes, which ask those polled to consider, “What do you think is in store for Russia in the next few months in terms of political life and in the economic domain?” (See figure 1.) This upswing certainly reflects the political component of Putin’s approval rating. Respondents’ assessments of Russia’s positive achievements (improvements in the economic performance during 1999) were complemented by hopes they pinned on the new leader’s personality. It is probably this combination that produced the effect of “explosive” confidence growth.

Another pattern emerges when examining Putin’s historical approval ratings. Putin’s popularity coincides with improvements in the expectations indexes, such as in 2001 and 2002, in late 2003 to early 2004, in July 2007, at the beginning of 2008, in September 2008, and at the end of 2009. Most of these coincide with election campaigns, such as in the beginning of 2000, when the upswing in expectations for Russia’s future marked the mobilization efforts of the regime, better known as the “rally ‘round the flag” effect, which increased confidence in the political image of the leader and the values associated with him by mobilizing the Russian people against external and internal threats, whether real or not.

Another indicator that reveals the political component of Putin’s approval ratings is the difference between the share of those who
approve of the president and the share of those who believe that the country is currently moving in the right direction. In the first decade of the 21st century, Putin’s approval rating was mostly in the range of 70–85 percent, averaging out at 76 percent, whereas the number of those who believed that the situation in the country was moving in the right direction ranged from only 35 to 50 percent, averaging out at 42 percent. (See figure 2.) Consequently, during most of that decade, an average of 34 percent of those polled did not believe that Russia was moving in the right direction but, at the same time,
approved of Putin. Thus, these people thought that the policies and values associated with their president were optimal under the circumstances and were giving him support a priori, or irrespective of the actual outcomes.

These two indicators (the president’s approval rating and the share of respondents who believe Russia is moving in the right direction) are closely correlated throughout most of the period under review \((r=0.81\) for the 2000–10 period). In other words, contrary to the “Teflon theory” (whereby external events had little impact on the leader’s rating), we can see that certain external events determine fluctuations in the view of the state of affairs and in Putin’s personal rating; however, the boost, or the difference between the two indicators, remains steadily high. As a result, the fluctuations in the rating caused by fluctuations of the views of the current state of affairs do not cause Putin’s supermajority to collapse.
The peculiarity of this situation will become obvious if compared to the performance of similar indicators recorded by US presidents. (See figure 3.) Bill Clinton, for instance, boasted a considerable amount of a priori support during his first term—his approval ratings are noticeably higher than the curve of the “positive assessment of the country’s current state of affairs.” During his second term, however, this gap (the delta) narrows down. Conversely, former president George W. Bush won by a very narrow margin, and the small amount of a priori confidence afforded to him is illustrated by the proximity of his approval rating to the curve for those who have a positive assessment of the current state of affairs in the US. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the delta shot up because of the rally ’round the flag effect, but then this overhang that provided Bush with a supermajority for some time gradually melted away.

The case of Yeltsin is also instructive. (See figure 4.) He began his second presidential term with a small amount of public trust, which is reflected in the positive differential between his approval ratings and the share of those polled who approved of Russia’s current state of affairs. In March 1998, the latter began to worsen while Yeltsin’s approval rating declined even faster. As a result, the difference between the indexes turned negative (meaning the number of those who approved of Yeltsin was lower than the number of those who believed that things were moving in the right direction).

The improving economic situation in March–July 1999 was reflected in the growing number of favorable assessments of the country’s current state of affairs but was not translated into growing support for Yeltsin. At the same time, support for Putin after he emerged on the political stage in 2000 and showed reform-oriented qualities soared considerably above the levels that would seem logical according to the economic determinism theory.

Therefore, as we have seen, the assessments of the country’s current state of affairs, including the economy, directly affect the president’s approval rating. But there is also another variable, the influence of which may increase or decrease the difference between the two indicators: the “a priori political confidence” factor.
These observations suggest that the aforementioned peaks of support for Putin because of the rallying effect do play a certain role. It is such moments, when the rally 'round the flag mobilization is in full force, that reveal to the voter the platform of values that links him or her to the leader and to the majority of the nation supportive of the leader. If the leader’s ability to consolidate confidence in his or her declared values and proposed policies is weak, even an improved economic performance or domestic state of affairs will not translate into a significant increase of support (as we saw in the case of Yeltsin’s final years as president). Conversely, if this ability is high or adequate, it may increase a leader’s popularity by earning the leader credit for allegedly improving the situation (Putin early in his career) or mitigate damage to the leader’s rating caused by a deteriorating situation (Bush in 2007).

Source: Gallup.
This brief analysis helps identify two key distinguishing features of Putin’s approval rating. First, it reveals that there are two political factors of Putin’s popularity. While his approval rating has demonstrated a close correlation with Russia’s economic performance, it cannot explain why his popularity peaked when the public rallied around him. These two factors are associated with Putin’s two main roles as Russia’s leader: “savior and protector of the nation” (the mobilization function) and “wealth manager.” The mobilization model ensures value-centered rallying around the leader in the face of a threat to the existing order: in 2000, the threat was Chechen terrorism and separatism; in 2003–04, Putin waged a “war” on the oligarchs; and in September 2008, the mobilization was related to the war against Georgia. Putin’s role as Russia’s savior complements his role as the nation’s guarantor of economic stability and thus increases
his rating in a favorable economic situation and minimizes the punishment in the event of an economic downturn.

As a result, the second most important feature of Putin’s approval rating is the very significant and consistent difference between the share of those who approve of the leader and those who believe that the country is moving in the right direction. US presidents, too, are capable of a popularity boost when the nation rallies around them, into the 70–75 percent neighborhood. What is unusual about Putin is that in his case, this extra boost is extremely resilient. Consequently, Putin’s supermajority support has survived any changes in ratings caused by outside developments. However, in addition to dramatically improved economic well-being (whose contribution to the ratings has been commented on by researchers), it required occasional periods of rallying that emphasized perceived threats to said well-being and helped create an institutional environment perpetuating the supermajority.

**From Supermajority to Simple Majority**

From this vantage point, it also makes sense to assess the changes in Putin’s popularity that occurred following the global financial crisis. Despite a noticeable deterioration in the assessment of the current economic situation in Russia at the height of the crisis (late 2008–early 2009), the level of support for both Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev dropped only minimally. The precrisis period (2007–08) was Putinism’s “golden age,” the era of peak support for the regime that reflected both extremely favorable assessments of the country’s current economic situation and the regime’s political mobilization in connection with the short, victorious war against Georgia.

As a result, in the first phase of the crisis, the public readily blamed external forces (for example, the global financial crisis and falling oil prices), thus reducing the negative impact on Putin’s popularity. At the same time, the share of positive assessments of Russia’s current situation declined by 20 percentage points, and Putin’s and Medvedev’s ratings lost only 10 percentage points, indicating confidence in the Putin system. This confidence was manifested by the rising numbers
of respondents who had high expectations for Russia’s future after Spring 2009, when the economic situation had stabilized.

However, the latter half of 2010 saw a reversal of fortune as the expectation indexes and the assessments of the current state of affairs stopped improving. This pessimism peaked in the winter of 2010–11, when surging inflation worsened Russia’s economic performance; as a result, in the first quarter of 2011, the assessment of the current situation and Putin’s approval rating each decreased by 10 percentage points. In the Spring 2011, real income and the assessments of personal wealth both improved; however, while the assessments of the current state of affairs stabilized, Putin’s approval rating continued to slide.

Even the steep rise in expectations and the assessment of the current situation during the months that immediately preceded the May 2012 presidential elections (from 40 percent to almost 50 percent) only marginally translated into the president’s rating, contributing no more than 5 percentage points. For the first time in Putin’s presidency, the rise in the assessments of personal well-being was negatively correlated with Putin’s rating, while the growth in positive views of the current state of affairs negatively affected the rating—the opposite of what one expects in times of rallying.

A review of Putin’s approval rating during the postcrisis period reveals that during the acute phase of the economic crisis (early 2009), the a priori confidence delta (the differential between the assessments of the current state of affairs in Russia and the leader’s approval rating) was as high as 40 points, but it then gradually declined and stabilized at 22–23 points in 2012–13. The reserve of a priori confidence declined by almost half, demonstrating the weakening of the political factors of support. Finally, after the presidential elections, against the backdrop of the stabilization of the assessments of personal wealth and Putin’s approval rating indexes, the expectations indexes continued to demonstrate a clear downward trend, signaling that confidence in the social-political system was dwindling.

The combination of the considerable decline in the a priori confidence delta; the negative correlation between the assessments of
the current situation in Russia and Putin’s approval rating in 2011, something that was not observed previously; the extremely weak effect of the pre-election mobilization early in 2012; and the worsening of expectations for the future against the backdrop of stable assessments of the situation in 2012–13 clearly points to the weakening of the political factors strengthening support for the leader and the regime as a whole. There has been a change in the way citizens reward or punish a leader in response to changes in the economic situation; downward pressure is now in place. And during this period, Putin did not have the same kind of stable supermajority support that he enjoyed previously.

Although Putin’s approval rating stabilized at 63 percent in 2013, the level of support continued to deteriorate. Thus, the shares of those who “largely support” Putin, “largely do not support” him, and “do not know” were 48, 29, and 23 percent, respectively, in November 2012, and were 47, 31, and 22 percent, respectively, in November 2013. Asked to name five or six politicians that they trusted most, an average of 40 percent named Putin in the first half of 2012, and the respective numbers in the second half of 2012, the first half of 2013, and the second half of 2013 were 37, 35, and 34 percent, respectively. Therefore, the group of staunch supporters was shrinking, while the share of those who viewed Putin unfavourably was growing.

In 2013, about 25 percent of the respondents said they would like to see Putin as president in 2018, approximately 15 percent said they would like to see “someone who would carry on Putin’s policies” as his successor, and around 40 percent said they wanted “someone who would propose a different solution to Russia’s problems” as the next president. This also demonstrates a growing demand for a change in the policy tack.

In the context of a wider range of opinion polls, the decline of Putin’s popularity looks like a systemic phenomenon related to the voters’ reassessment of both the efficiency of the current political regime and its fundamental values and ideologemes. The former was clearly seen from the changes in the replies to the questions about the level of corruption and bureaucracy. In the 2000s, approximately
equal percentages of respondents (20–25 percent) held opposing views on whether corruption and bureaucracy had increased or decreased; in 2011–13, those who shared the first view grew to 45–50 percent, while the second view was held by only 6–7 percent of the respondents.9

A creeping reassessment of the regime’s efficiency is also reflected by other polls. In 2006, 2007, and 2010, an average of 30 percent chose to describe what was happening in the country as “growth and development,” while 27 percent viewed the situation as “slowdown and stagnation”; in 2011, 2012, and 2013 polls, the share of the first description was 17 percent on average, while the second one accounted for 35 percent.

Major changes occurred in the way the respondents assessed the key to Putin’s system of governance—the “vertical of power.” In the 2000s, an average of 39 percent of the respondents said the power vertical was more beneficial than harmful, while 30 percent held the opposite view; in 2012–13, this ratio virtually reversed, as an average of 31 percent viewed the vertical favorably and 37 percent assessed it negatively. All of these polls suggest that 2010–13 saw not only the degradation of Putin’s image, but also the gradual reassessment of the fundamental ideologemes and values (such as order, centralization, and stability) that were associated with that image and institutional solutions proposed by the leader.

**Supermajority and the Institutional Dynamics of the Plebiscitary Regime**

Despite the aforementioned changes, Putin’s approval rating in 2012–13 still remained rather high by the standards of democratic countries. This would lead some to conclude that the threats to the regime were not that grave. However, things look different in the context of plebiscitary presidentialism.

The leader’s stable supermajority is key to stability under the proposed model of plebiscitary presidentialism. The leader uses broad-based public support to weaken the competing political actors and institutions that form under a system of checks and balances, as
well as to strengthen control over the government bureaucracy and public institutions that had previously been under the influence of the competing interest groups. Thus, Putin’s first term was dedicated to weakening the political influence of the regional leaders and the oligarchs (political actors), as well as to strengthening the influence of the law enforcement agencies (the prosecutor’s office, interior ministry, or courts) and the national media, most of all the national TV channels.

It is important to focus on the mechanism that facilitated the conversion of the leader’s popularity into institutional capital. With weak support for the leader (as we saw during Yeltsin’s second term), the opportunist and confrontational strategies of the elites aimed at mobilization and maintenance of opposition sentiments offer considerable benefits, as they create a platform for haggling with the government over redistribution of powers and resources.

Conversely, a high level of support for the leader makes such strategies unbeneﬁcial and irrational. Playing against the leader does not create meaningful threats to him and, as a result, has a boomerang effect: use of force against nonloyal groups becomes possible because it does not have a dangerous destabilization potential and, on the contrary, may contribute to political mobilization.

This is precisely what enabled Putin to strip two inﬂuential oligarchs, Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky, of political influence and then to break up the Yukos empire. Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s attempt to oppose Putin’s growing inﬂuence turned into the anti-oligarchic consolidation Putin used to form a new parliamentary majority during the 2003 parliamentary elections, change the government that he inherited from Yeltsin, and triumphantly enter his second term as president. Also, the candidates allowed to take part in the 2004 presidential elections were selected so as to ensure Putin won a big enough share of the votes to conﬁrm his plebiscitary status.

In summary, in a stable supermajority situation, confrontation strategy proves to be irrational for the elite groups, and investment in the opposition does not produce results, while loyalty pays dividends. In its turn, the resulting consolidation of the elites improves the efficiency of the leadership and of the political regime.
as a whole. The demonstration of the leader’s ability to achieve stated objectives makes an even more vivid impression on the public because weak support for former leaders allowed for ongoing opportunism on the part of the elites and, accordingly, an inefficient government. As a result, consolidation of the elites helps maintain the popularity of the leader and his stable supermajority, which transforms into institutional capital and a superpresidency (the exclusive level of control of political and government institutions against consistent efforts to restrict opportunities for the opposition and other political players). Even when the leader goes beyond the scope of his powers or opts for extralegal practices—such as pressure on the judiciary, confiscation of property, or election machinations—it does not undermine his legitimacy in the eyes of the population and is even perceived by them as direct implementation of the plebiscitary mandate.  

The opposite is also true: transformation of the supermajority into a simple majority is dangerous for a plebiscitary leader, as it improves the effectiveness of the confrontational and opportunistic strategies of the elites. The opposition becomes more visible, while the level of loyalty starts declining, which the public perceives as a decline in the efficiency of the leader and of the regime that he had built. This launches a new phase of political dynamics: lower popularity leads to lower loyalty of the elites and reduces the regime’s ability to demonstrate its efficiency, which in turn set the stage for further decline in the leader’s approval rating. In other words, the snowballing mechanism begins to work in reverse.

In sum, proceeding from the common model whereby the efficiency of Putin’s electoral authoritarianism is explained by its ability to build an effective carrot-and-stick system to ensure the elites’ loyalty, the most important factor in this equation is the public’s level of support for the regime (or its leader). A decline in support radically pushes up the cost of ensuring the loyalty of the elites, which reduces the overall effectiveness of the regime. These interrelated processes in relation to the three main actors—the leader (president), the elites, and the public—determine the internal political dynamics of electoral authoritarianism (figure 5).
The demand for centralization and consolidation of power was borne of the fears that the chaos of the 1990s might come back and allowed Putin to easily achieve the mobilization effect by presenting society threats to the stability. However, during the election campaign of 2012, that model nearly failed to work because the citizens were becoming increasingly doubtful about the effectiveness of centralization as these threats never materialized. Yet the call for honest elections, which became the central slogan of the Russian protests in 2011–12, and the opinion polls demonstrated the growing demand for decentralization and accountability of the authorities. (See figure 6.)

Erosion and disintegration of the supermajority make the opposition look more legitimate in the eyes of the public. (Changes in the demand for the opposition are shown in figure 7.) Although the protest movement of 2011–13 largely remained a Moscow-based phenomenon, and readiness to personally participate in the protests remained low (about 15 percent), around 40 percent of the respondents in the nationwide polls conducted by the Levada Center expressed a certain degree of sympathy with the Moscow protests.
**Figure 6**

**Changes in Demand for Centralization/Decentralization**

*Do You Think It Would Be Better if All Powers Were Concentrated in One Entity or Distributed among Various Entities Supervising One Another?*

*Is Russia Now More Interested in Strengthening Government Authority or in Making the Government Accountable to Society?*

Source: Levada Center.
throughout 2012, despite the regime’s intensifying televised propaganda efforts.\(^{12}\)

Putin’s project to create a dominant (ruling) party designed to provide mechanisms for co-opting the regional elites in an environment of consistent centralization essentially failed in 2011–13. The officially announced result of United Russia in December 2011—49 percent of the votes, as compared to 64 percent in 2007—not only looked unsatisfactory but also sparked mass protests and allegations of falsification. In 32 regions, including the more economically advanced part of the country, the officially announced result of the party turned out to be below 40 percent. The result pointed not only to the declining popularity of the ruling party and the regime as a whole, but also to the relative failure of the efforts to reform the system of regional government; the appointed governors failed to ensure the consolidation of the regional elites and use it as a basis for achieving the required level of the electorate’s loyalty.
Despite the conservative consolidation attempt Putin made in 2012–13, his rating remained close to the historical lows recorded in December 2011. (An average of 65.3 percent had confidence in Putin in the second half of 2012, and 63.2 and 63.6 percent in the first and second half of 2013, respectively.) The regional elections of September 2013 revealed either the passivity of the public where the elections were not competitive, or the mobilization of protest voting where opposition candidates were allowed to take part in the elections; contrary to sociologists’ predictions, Alexei Navalny received about 30 percent of the votes in Moscow and nearly made it to the second round, while in Yekaterinburg, opposition candidate Yevgeny Roizman won the mayoral election, garnering 36 percent of the votes.

The younger and better-educated population of large cities displayed their ability to unite with minimum resources. At the same time, support from the more conservative groups does not appear to be guaranteed either: as Daniel Treisman’s analysis reveals, during the postcrisis period, the decline in Putin’s approval rating was attributed to the loss of support among low-income groups and the periphery.13

**A Quest for a New Supermajority**

I have tried to show certain mechanisms of plebiscitary presidentialism. First, the consolidation of extraordinary support for the leader (consolidation of supermajority) is ensured by two mutually complementary factors of popularity: the economic factor and the mobilization factor. Recurrent mobilization episodes where the leader acts as the protector of stabilization achievements allow him to maximize the bonuses for economic wealth and minimize the penalties for temporary economic failures. In turn, a supermajority enables the leader to change the rules of the game—to institutionally consolidate his dominance by restricting the rights of the opposition and weakening institutional checks to the presidential authority (like the parliament, the judiciary, regional autonomy, and independence of the media). Finally, the stable supermajority makes it possible to maintain a high level of loyalty among the elites and, as a result, to
demonstrate the efficiency of the regime to the public.

Against the backdrop of the shifts in public opinion in the early 2010s, lower assessments of the efficiency of the regime, and the Moscow protests, Putin essentially failed to effectively mobilize a supermajority in his 2012 election campaign. At the same time, considerable deterioration of economic performance in the latter half of 2012 and in 2013, against the background of high oil prices, marked yet another challenge. The economic slide into stagnation in itself does not pose a critical threat to the regime, but in the context of a weakening mobilization model of consolidation, it undermines Putin’s second role—that of a “wealth manager”—and, as a result, questions again the exclusivity and scope of the powers that he has as a plebiscitary president, triggering the process of further erosion of the loyal majority.

In this situation, regeneration of a supermajority could be achieved only through a serious mobilization project comparable to the most intense mobilization episodes in the history of Putin’s leadership: the second war in Chechnya in the early 2000s and the war in Georgia in the summer of 2008. The annexation of Crimea that initiated a major conflict with the West is designed to reformat the internal policy space and form a new supermajority of the nation to fight against an alliance of hostile powers to restore control over its historical territories, marginalize the elite with a pro-Western agenda (social and economic modernization), and create a new framework for the regime’s legitimacy in the medium term.

The patriotic hysteria of early 2014 and the upswing in Putin’s approval ratings to the levels of previous mobilization peaks (80–85 percent approval) testify to the success of the pro-Crimean, anti-Ukrainian, and anti-Western mobilization. At the same time, what makes this episode different from the mobilization template of the 2000s is that, in the preceding episodes, the key sign of mobilization was a steep rise in the expectation indexes, whereas in the current episode the rise in Putin’s approval rating occurred while the expectation indexes on the whole maintained a negative trend over the past two years. Should this specific attribute survive, it will point to the contradictory character of the current support, which may
complicate transition from the mobilization to that of new stability.

It is important to remember that a supermajority is a political construct that not so much reflects public opinion as shapes it by crowding out alternative political agendas and positions from the public space. In the face of the rather high demand for such alternative agendas, which took shape late in the 2000s and early in the 2010s, the consolidation of a supermajority calls for a high level of mobilization, while signs of the regime's declining efficiency may trigger the process of its disintegration.

Unlike the Brezhnev version of conservative stabilization, which combined pinpointed and limited reprisals with the expansion of domestic consumption through broader use of oil and gas rent incomes, the present regime can hardly count on rent expansion. In fact, their contraction because of Russia's economic decline is more likely. With that dynamic in mind, it appears that an effective internal mobilization policy may involve radical redistribution of rent flows designed to support a new anti-Western coalition, broader oppressive practices and tighter ideological control of society, and a fairly high level of external confrontation and drummed-up threats facing society and blocking resumption of the civil agenda that was formed during the precrisis period.

Putin has in effect scrapped the slogans of stability and status-quo maintenance that he used in his 2012 election campaign by launching the preventive counterrevolution mechanism. As I have attempted to show, the emerging internal tensions and the specific mechanisms of the authoritarian equilibrium triggered the regime's break with the previous modus operandi and its transition toward a conflict-ridden scenario. The question is how well Putin will be able to control this scenario.

Notes


6. Levada Center, “When It Comes to the Actions of Vladimir Putin at the Post of the President of Russia, Do You Generally Support or Not Support These Actions; or Do You Not Know Enough about Them to Say One Way or Another? (table),” March 12, 2013, www.levada.ru/03-12-2013/rossiyane-o-vladimire-putine.

reitingi-odobreniya-i-doveriya.


11. See, for example, Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).


PART III

Civil Society: Defeat and Radicalization?
“March snow has blanketed everything. Not a trace of the rallies,” the poet Vsevolod Yemelin wrote. The waning street activism and the conservative wave that rose in 2012–13 in Russian politics are just as perplexing as the mighty upsurge of protest emotions in the winter of 2011–12, which surprised both experts and the ordinary public alike. Let us not rush and declare such rapid changes as Russia’s “special stature,” recalling the famous poem by Fyodor Tyutchev that “cannot be measured with a common yardstick.” Such stature is found in any society where the authorities deem themselves the sole political actors, while their subjects are only left to hope that the government does not lead them to an impasse or off a cliff into an abyss. China and the Islamic Orient once possessed a similar “special stature,” whereby periods of brilliance alternated with nationwide catastrophes.

Proponents of the present-day regime are fond of discussing the state-centric nature of Russian history and the political culture it engendered. Indeed, the subject of a Russian tsar or of the Soviet state (the “Soviet man” of the propaganda clichés) was allowed to sacrifice his life (“for the tsar and the fatherland” or “for the Motherland and Stalin,” to recall the folk slogans of the day), to work by the sweat of his brow, and to unanimously approve anything the state would do to him and the country. One thing was off limits: taking part in the decision-making process—that is, challenging the authorities or trying to control them.

All Russian modernization campaigns from Peter the Great to Vladimir Putin share two features: they start with an acute deficit of historical time, with Russia falling rapidly behind advanced nations,
and the government was their only executor. All the private actors in the economy and society were relegated to the role of “cogs” (vintiki, in Stalin’s famous expression) in a huge and all-knowing machine that would execute ideas conceived high above.

In a well-known theory of political culture, Russia was invariably dominated by the subject culture, with sizable enclaves of parochial culture in rural areas and numerous ethnic republics, whereas the participatory culture, hereinafter referred to as the “civic culture,” had been virtually nonexistent until recently. According to Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, what sets “citizens” apart from “subjects” is that in citizens’ attitude toward the political system they consider not only things they may get as an output but also their potential input if they were to play an active role in the polity. Such a political culture is essentially a relationship between an activist state and a passive civil society.

Does the weakness of Russian civic culture validate the conclusion that Russia is not ready for democracy, and will the Russian political regime invariably feature—with an even greater clarity—corporatist and authoritarian aspects? I have three main objections to this approach.

First, a statement describing the existing situation is merely a starting point for an action strategy. As politician and political scientist Daniel Moynihan comments, “The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics that determines the success of the society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change the culture and save it from itself.” A politician may take note of objective obstacles to development and look for ways to overcome them, or he or she may use such obstacles as a pretext to preserve the existing order for the purpose of retaining a power monopoly. As I explain later, having encountered the first mass manifestations of civic culture, the Russian authorities have chosen the latter option.

Second, the absence of “citizens” is not synonymous with political stability. Suddenly disabused of the government’s legitimacy, even a perennial subject may rise against the powers that be. This is essentially what Russia experienced in January 1905, February 1917, and August 1991. In 1991, so acute was the crisis of the dying Soviet
system that, to quote a well-known dictum by Adam Przeworski, one could say that in the USSR “the melting iceberg of civil society overflowed the dams of the authoritarian regime.” Yet unlike citizens, insurgent subjects have no positive program, often lack organization or leaders, and, most importantly, have neither experience nor motivation to look for an evolutionary way out of their relationship with the government they no longer trust.

Third, and finally, civic culture is a product and not a prerequisite of democracy. As correctly noted by Philippe Schmitter and Terry Karl, it takes a lot of time to establish a culture of tolerance, mutual respect, compromise, and trust in public authorities. Most important during the period of democratization, they believe, is to maintain prudence in dealings with any opponents. Yet, again, in the case of Russia, despite numerous decent objective (structural) prerequisites for democratization—such as high levels of literacy and education—subjective prerequisites were much weaker than those of Russia’s Eastern and Central European neighbors. These prerequisites included traditions of self-organization and self-government in grassroots communities, lower levels of social capital and interpersonal trust, and a political elite accustomed to autocracy.

**What Makes Russians Subjects Rather than Citizens?**

In Russia since Soviet times, the word “citizen” has carried a stigma of inferiority; it refers to a person you cannot call a “comrade” in a courtroom or a police precinct, because the person in question has done something unseemly. The Soviet development model has produced a phenomenon never before seen: an industrial, urban, and educated society lacking market institutions, private property, and institutionalized competition in the economy or politics. In the totalitarian USSR, only a small number of leisure activities remained below the government radar, although government control over individuals’ private lives weakened in the last decades of the Soviet Union.

The absence of free-market relations affected not only the economic domain but also numerous social processes. The interpersonal trust that develops in a nonmarket, repressive environment
assumes a highly unique nature: individuals either trust their own circle (ascriptive trust) or join an “anti-boss conspiracy,” sharing informal collective practices whereby the burden of administrative pressure could be alleviated, goods in short supply under the Communist rule could be obtained, and people could cover for one another in cases of minor offences.\(^7\) Such distorted trust helps people survive in modern-day Russia as well. However, it fails to bring about a key asset of civic culture—in other words, social capital, or a system of horizontal connections whereby people are able to arrive at creative solutions and come together for socially meaningful purposes, including in the political domain.

Russia’s nonuniform socioeconomic development has brought about a fragmentation of values. There is a well-known concept of three Russian nations with social differentiation depending on where individuals live: active and competitive populations are concentrated in major cities, stagnation is common in small towns and villages, and rising tensions are prevalent in midsized cities.\(^8\) This taxonomy fits rather well with the three types of social capital accumulated by various sections of Russian society, as identified by Lev Gudkov.

First, modern capital is held by persons who owe their prosperity to their own efforts and skills rather than to government paternalism. Such social capital is “based on a complex system of generalized social rules and relationships; it is comparable to Western societies.” In the case of premodern capital, “Trust is based on direct personal and informal ties, relationships of group affiliation and neighborhood.” Finally, antimodern capital “mixes the experience of surviving under Communism . . . with new ideology-driven forms.” Its carriers find it hardest to adapt to a new economic reality that is heavily dependent on the state and are most liable to be affected by the conservative wave of state policies and propaganda.\(^9\)

Among the ruling class, the newly learned free-market laws and economic boom have quickly led the resurging bureaucracy to establish a power-property alliance, with a sizable section of businesses relying on government orders and corrupt kickback arrangements for their daily bread. This is a classic king-of-the-hill situation whereby the elite is doing its best to retain their power monopoly
at the cost of sabotaging modern institutions conducive to development. The government sees any unauthorized activity, particularly any activity in the political domain, as an encroachment on its monopoly to wield power and dispose of resources.

The causal circle appears to close: both at the bottom and the top of the social pyramid, the human factor prevents rather than facilitates the establishment of a civic culture. Weak horizontal links between ordinary people translate into general mistrust of the authorities. According to a Levada poll conducted for the purposes of civil society research, most Russians believe that political activity includes not only election observation at polling stations (71 percent) but also supervision of government authorities (69 percent) and discussion of laws and government decisions (63 percent), whereas only 32 percent believe that discussion of social problems constitutes a political activity. Russian citizens are not used to participating in politics; they perceive this domain as alien to their daily lives (as opposed to social issues of direct relevance to their lives). (By contrast, in Western democracies, such functions are viewed as normal and natural to a civil society, while “politics” is understood to mean only things directly relevant to electoral competition.)

Citizens, Come What May

Despite the structural obstacles outlined previously, civic culture is taking shape in Russia, driven by the active efforts of an ever-greater number of people. Notwithstanding reservations about whether Russia’s development over the last quarter-century has been a success, the nation has turned into a free-market economy. Private property and the exchange of goods for money have spawned the bourgeoisie, the very actor without whom, according to Barrington Moore Jr.’s well-known dictum, no democracy could exist. A small and slowly developing new middle class has now become a reality, and its members have been acquiring numerous behavioral skills typical of civic culture, among them learning to save their money, taking care of their health, and seeking a better quality of life. Having
developed reasonable behavior within their own household economy, the members of the Russian middle class want to see similar behaviors in sociopolitical life.

The second structural factor conducive to the emergence of a Russian culture of citizenship involves two new kinds of economic activity that have been developing in Russia. The first kind comprises high-tech, mostly communications industries (even though these have only developed in select Russian enclaves); the second spans services and trade. Both of these areas of economic activity call for fundamentally new functions, require lots of new connections and contacts, and require the persons involved to develop new social roles and skills for dealing with partners and customers. Most importantly, these individuals’ business careers are less dependent on the state, which teaches people to rely on their own strength and know-how. Such individuals have at least superficial familiarity with the Western way of life; they have travelled to the West and often have friends, acquaintances, and business partners there.

Thus, this is a different type of social mobilization. One might say that for the first time since 1917, a mass social foundation (even though not that large) for a liberal political program has emerged in Russia. Clearly, such developments are only typical of major cities, first and foremost Moscow, which has in recent years absorbed several hundred thousand active young individuals from the Russian provinces. It is these potential upwardly mobile young men and women who protested against the authorities’ actions in the fall and winter of 2011–12. This is why a few clarifications must be made regarding the composition and social base of the protest rallies. None of the definitions often used for this purpose seems quite appropriate.

1. **It is not just the middle class.** As shown by opinion polls, support for the protests among well-off and well-educated Russians was only marginally higher than the nationwide average. A majority of the Russian middle class is not pro-protest, given that a sizable percentage of such individuals owe their success in life to working for government-dependent
businesses and therefore support the regime as their ultimate employer. In addition, they see the government as a protector from either “the chaos of instability” or the “social jealousy” of poorer classes or immigrants. At the same time, it was men and women from this economic and social stratum that made up the core of the protest rallies and comprised a larger share of the rally crowds compared to their percentage of Moscow’s overall population.

2. **It is not civil society.** As shown later, even among “true” civil society organizations (as opposed to government-organized yet pro-forma “nongovernmental organizations”), only a minority could be considered political opposition. Civil society did not take over Bolotnaya Square; it was the protests—involving self-organization, Internet-based communications, and internal cultures—that fostered the development of civil society, while the authorities’ subsequent crackdowns on civic activists consolidated the political attitudes of protest.

3. **It is not the creative class (as the official propaganda would sarcastically label “the protesters”).** The social and occupational profile of the protesters is much more diverse. However, the Bolotnaya Square protests truly looked creative in the modes that the protesters used to self-organize and express their positions.

Thus, a moniker that looks more like a journalistic cliché than a scientific term is perhaps closest to capturing the essence of the protesters: “angry citizens.” Their protestation appears politically rather than socially or economically driven. They viewed Putin’s blunt declaration of his return to the presidency as a train wreck of their hopes for a makeover of government institutions and thus as blocking their life’s prospects. They viewed the broadly circulated news of vote rigging in the 2011 Duma election as an insult to their dignity.
Civil Society

Assessing the development level of Russia’s civil society is a glass-half-empty versus glass-half-full problem. On the one hand, by any objective standard the development of Russia’s civil society badly trails not only that of Western nations but also that of Central and Eastern European nations. Thus, the share of the third-sector contribution to GDP (less than 1 percent) and employment (0.7 percent) is an order of magnitude lower than in developed economies. Less than 9 percent of Russians boast experience participating in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). (Expansion of the scope of NGO functions and activities is hampered by numerous restrictions, not just weak financial support or government repression of numerous independent NGOs.)

On the other hand, the achievements of Russian civil society should not be underestimated. Its key success is that NGOs have filled niches left empty by the government. Charity work, promotion of modern art, supplementary education, and human rights advocacy—once entirely absent—have arisen and continue to progress. In many cases, noncommercial organizations “substitute” for government agencies in highly specialized niches where the state does not quite reach: hospice care, aid for patients with rare conditions, and continuing education and retraining. Equally important are operations and self-organization in areas that have only taken root in Russia since the free-market system was established. These include newly created business associations, consumer protection societies, and unofficial trade unions and homeowner associations, of which there are still relatively few.

A profile of a 2013 civil society activist indicates that key drivers of participation in collective actions include the individual’s motivations and psychological traits rather than social or demographic parameters, as these activist men and women vastly differ in social and economic status. While new activities are most often initiated by males, the bulk of the work is performed by women. People with lots of free time dominate: either young people free of family chores, retirees, or people near retirement age. While members of
the middle class do not constitute a majority, they often lead such organizations.

It is not political or ideological views that make up an activist’s world view (Weltanschauung). Rather, it is a certain energy and a pro-change attitude. Activists loath passivity and stagnation, and they expect society and the government to seek and work for positive changes. The emergence of such a powerful demand for change, particularly in an active segment of society with substantial social capital, signifies a landmark event showing that the state cannot but change. A largely similar process occurred in the USSR during perestroika, as convincingly described in a recent book by Leon Aron. However, a caveat is in order: the scope of demand for change in present-day Russia is much narrower. Still, these women and men are a primary reason for conflict between civil society and the government, with the government often betting on stability and appeals to conservative sections of society.

What Has Civic Culture Achieved?

Even as the developments of 2011–13 offer little ground for optimism, some significant, albeit not highly visible, civic culture achievements indicate that this culture has become a reality of Russian politics. First, without protests against society’s inability to peacefully change the government and vote rigging, no changes would have occurred, including the return to gubernatorial elections and a mixed electoral system, the removal of party registration barriers, and a significant, if not radical, curtailment of vote-rigging practices in the regional and municipal elections. A major mistake of the protest movement was its failure to claim these reforms as a victory. Such a demonstration of tangible success would have, at least for a while, boosted the motivation of its participants and supporters.

Furthermore, street protests have been legitimized as a form of influencing the government. According to a February 2013 Levada Center poll, 22 percent of respondents shared the protesters’ views, only 18 percent spoke negatively of the protests, and the modal response (40 percent) was as follows: “I am not that interested in
the protests, but people are entitled to peacefully express any of their demands.” Against the background of pervasive government propaganda intended to discredit the protest movement, the modal response is tantamount to friendly neutrality: it recognizes the legitimacy of street protests as a way to defend one’s interests.

Second, Putin and his coterie recognized, albeit perhaps temporarily, the failure of their former neocorporatist relationship model between the government and its subjects, whereby an overwhelming majority blindly accepts government actions and follows them. With the arrival of angry citizens, the grand and tranquil rhetoric of a truly popular personalistic leader no longer secures the stability that was rightly thought of as the key pillar of Putin’s power. Putinist consensus has ceased to exist, thanks to the angry citizens.

Putin’s 2012 election and the relatively stable levels of public trust in him until Spring 2014 are a reflection of the public’s gratitude toward the president for stability. However, even hardcore Putin supporters do not expect a material improvement in living standards or qualitative improvements to occur on his watch. This is best illustrated in figure 1, which shows respondents’ opinions in a 2013 survey regarding Russia’s development path going forward.

The most interesting finding is the collapsing popularity of Russia’s Putinist development path: only one-fourth of the respondents supported it. As regards European-style democracy, optimists note that it is supported by a plurality of respondents, while pessimists point out that the number of such pro-Europeans is less than the total of status-quo supporters plus those preferring a return to Brezhnevist or Stalinist times.

The Authorities’ Response

Assuming, with some simplification, that the citizenry’s notions of the regime’s legitimacy could be interpreted as a combination of three parameters—the government’s performance, symbolic leadership, and protection from internal and external threats—by 2014, Russian civic culture had significantly undermined the second component and at the very least sowed seeds of doubt regarding the first.
In 2012–13, the regime undertook a series of measures to arrest this entropy, described in the following list.

1. **Political system reforms are expanding and will further expand political pluralism.** To the extent that such expansion (in the form of numerous small parties emerging to win a certain percentage of seats in local and regional representative authorities) does not threaten the government monopoly, it is permitted: in the 30 gubernatorial elections in September 2014, all of the incumbents won, with half of them scoring higher than 80 percent.

   However, the ruling elite retains the commanding heights. Thanks to the “municipal filter,” any “dangerous” opposition figures cannot even run for governor unless authorized by the incumbent; meanwhile, some suggestions have been made to abolish direct mayoral elections in major cities. The only party that experienced administrative pressure on a regular basis during the 2013 elections was the civic platform...
2. **Dissent may be permitted so long as it does not translate into politically charged actions.** This means pinpointed repressions and extensive intimidation of protest movement activists and independent NGOs. Specific examples of this include the Pussy Riot case; Alexei Navalny’s conviction; the Bolotnaya Square case against participants in the May 6, 2012, protest, which has been dragging on for 30-plus months; harsh audits of more than 2,000 NGOs to see if they operate as “foreign agents”; and interrogations and searches targeting experts involved in providing an independent review of Khodorkovsky’s second trial sentence.  

3. **The regime also launched an intense anti-Western and antiliberal campaign.** Its first tier targeted “foreign agents,” or a number of Bolotnaya Square defendants allegedly bankrolled by the West. This was followed by an attack on postmodernist values (including but not limited to tolerance of minorities and more permissive sexual behavior) and an attempt to cast the Russian regime as none other than a global leader for “traditional” (conservative) values. The propaganda line has also been pushing for the equivalence of Western democracy and same-sex marriage.

With the United Russia party’s popularity on the wane, it appears to have been replaced in its role as the Putinist organization by the All-Russia People’s Front, an amorphous entity that lacks any, even nominal, internal democratic procedures. The objective of the “conservative line” is not to abolish the civic culture but rather to marginalize it in ideology and politics. As seen by the Russian regime, civic culture is not merely a competitor but also a potential source of regime delegitimization or even an elemental force that could flood the streets as in the Ukrainian Maidan scenario and the Velvet Revolution, which ousted the Communist regimes a quarter-century ago.
The Russian leadership (whether in their heart of hearts or for propaganda purposes only) believe that the growth of civic culture is spawned by malicious actions of external forces and a mythical “fifth column” within the country, rather than by objective social developments. As it impedes the development of civic culture, the government increasingly dooms itself to a confrontation with a section of society that is dynamic and financially comfortable, has social resources, and therefore is essential for the nation’s successful socioeconomic development.

**Medium-Term Projection:**

**The Civic Culture Development Path**

The starting point of the civic culture development process is very clear: objective processes will propel the development of civic culture forward, even though it could proceed at a slower pace if the overall path of socioeconomic development is less successful and if the government does its best to impede such processes through imitation and neocorporatist manipulation. One thing will set such policies apart from the past decade: citizens already feel that even though they may not be a force, they are a community—albeit a largely virtual one without universally recognized leaders and programs, disappointed with the results of its taking to the street.

Russia’s annexation of Crimea will have extensive and multifaceted consequences for the entire country and for the configuration of its public forces in particular. A confrontation with the West will mean a modernization slowdown in Russia and a strengthening of archaic and anti-Western currents within the nation’s sociopolitical discourse. The impact on the new classes and the evolving public consciousness of civic culture will be profoundly negative. Crimean “reabsorption” into Russia is popular, while public opinion fails to recognize the economic and reputational costs of such a decision. (In the weeks leading up to the annexation, the propaganda pressure of government-controlled national TV was unprecedented, even exceeding Soviet-era standards.)
Russian authorities will most likely attempt to extend the time horizon of such consolidation by pressuring the opposition with even greater force. In his Crimean annexation address to Russia’s Federal Assembly, Putin preemptively explained the potential deterioration of the socioeconomic situation in Russia by “actions of a certain fifth column, various national traitors,” meaning those who disagree with the government’s policy, and implying ever tougher restrictions against the forces of opposition, civil society, and free media.22

At the same time, with every passing year the conservative wave and neocorporatist policy will conflict with, to an ever greater extent, not only the minority of self-conscious citizens in the opposition but also the sentiments of the majority of subjects, as economic crisis will leave fewer social benefits for the government to redistribute. For the foreseeable future, this does not suggest any upsurge in the mass protest movement; more likely, we will initially see localized occurrences, such as the Arkhangelsk protests against retiree benefit cuts. However, overall approval of the regime—and, potentially, the percentage of pro-regime election votes—will keep sliding. The conservative-wave rhetoric will be of little effect in mitigating these antigovernment sentiments.

The cumulative impact of such newly changed attitudes toward the government is likely to be felt during a period of high sensitivity for the political regime: from the Duma elections of 2016 through the presidential race of 2018. The regime would likely react with another round of preventive screw tightening, which may accelerate the unfolding crisis.

Therefore, a scenario for civic culture development involves continuation or likely strengthening of the authorities’ ideological and administrative pressure against citizens’ attempts to advocate for their rights and interests. A key variable is the extent to which the government will attempt to address the cash shortfall at the expense of the wealthier section of the population (for example, by introducing a progressive income tax or by increasing property taxes or utility rates payable by high-income households—policies that have so far been rejected).
Regardless, such a scenario fails to address any structural or institutional problems of the present-day policies and therefore risks a gradual slide into a major social and political crisis. Although the Russian public has a huge stock of patience, which gives the government considerable room for maneuver, it is very hard to predict how the authorities will behave when the social policy resources begin to dry up.

The best-case scenario of civic culture development would have several important factors. First, the trends that have already spawned the bourgeoisie and middle class will persist, and civil society will survive the foreign-agent witch hunt to live another day. Second, the demand for justice in government and for greater political pluralism will expand as the regime’s legitimacy erodes. Third, even half-baked political system reforms expand the room for competition and pluralism. Individuals in power (including governors) have to pay more attention to public sentiment while the expanded use of the first-past-the-post election system across all levels of government brings in new people who are more responsive to their voters’ needs.

Conclusion

In the longer run, a lot would depend on how the government behaves in the new environment: Does the government understand that the current economic policy will lead to an impasse? Will it opt for structural and institutional reforms that would improve the business and investment climate nationwide, including by lowering administrative barriers to private businesses, strengthening property rights, and enhancing the judiciary’s independence? If so, such actions will activate upward social mobility mechanisms for persons inclined toward civic culture.

How consistent will political system reform be? At this point, one could note greater competition but not the emergence of new collective political actors in parliamentary politics—the sort of actors who could serve as an alternative or, at least, a counterbalance to the government and who favor evolutionary rather than revolutionary regime changes. In the regional elections of 2013, Prokhorov’s party
managed to emerge as number one among newcomer parties; so far, however, there is insufficient reason to expect that it would be able to develop into the very force capable of providing a political vanguard for the citizen culture.

As noted previously, the “post-Crimean” development of the internal political environment will clearly weaken any positive impact of such reforms. Given the announced reforms of local government, the autonomous status of major city elites and budgets could be retained, because such cities not only serve as economic points of growth but also act as civic culture incubators.

Will the government be able to recognize that the promotion of archconservative and anti-Western attitudes within society is highly detrimental and leads nowhere? Will it at least attempt to enter into a dialogue with the section of the public that seeks participation in the nation’s political life? In any case, the development of civic culture will not be quick. Even under the best-case scenario, the subject culture and the civic culture would coexist over a long time period, engendering stresses and crises but ultimately modifying the subject cultures and therefore tilting the balance toward civic virtues.23

Having started this article with a poetry quote, let us finish with prose: “Annushka has already bought the sunflower oil, and has not only bought it, but has already spilled it,” as Mikhail Bulgakov’s protagonist said.24 Anyone seeking to abolish civic culture in Russia is bound to slip on that spilled oil. Civic culture already exists, and individuals may only impede or foster progress. The choice is not up to the Russian government alone; it is open to us all.

Author’s Note: Since this paper was written, the subsequent effects on the Russian political arena, and public opinion in particular, resulted in the most unfavorable possible scenario for civic culture. While my predictions of such negative trends were accurate as far as they went, two corrections are due given the events of the last year.

First, the pressure on society and repressive trends have been extremely strong. Second, the public proved to be even more gullible than anticipated to the surge of anti-Western (and de facto antimodernity) propaganda. This propaganda blitz, however, could not have been so effective had it
not been for the persistence of paternalism and rudiments of Cold War mentality, which proved to be still very much alive in Russia, which is the worst news for the development of civic culture.

Yet, as I believed a year ago, this rallying round the flag buys time for the regime but does not resolve a single socioeconomic problem. The aggravating crisis has already brought down social optimism boosted by last year’s euphoria. Only time will show how growing dissatisfaction with social and economic realities conflicts or coexists with the pro-regime consolidation attained in 2014, and in which way the civic culture will manifest itself in the next act of this drama.

Notes


8. In addition to the “three Russian nations,” Natalya Zubarevich developed a theory of “four distinct Russian nations” to describe the country’s social development. For both theories, see Natalya Zubarevich, “Social Differentiation of Cities and Regions,” Pro et Contra 56, no. 4–5 (July–October
THE DIFFICULT BIRTH OF CIVIC CULTURE

15. The “third sector” refers to the nonprofit or tertiary sector, which lies between business and government.
17. Ibid., 34–40.
20. Ibid., 7.
21. Members of Pussy Riot, a feminist punk-rock band, were arrested in February 2011 for performing a song protesting the connection between the Orthodox Church and the Putin regime inside a prominent Moscow cathedral. Maria Alyokhina, Yekaterina Samutsevich, and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova were convicted of hooliganism in 2012 in connection with
the incident. Samutsevich received probation in October of that year, but Alyokhina and Tolokonnikova served their sentences in a prison camp until their release in December 2013 under an amnesty law initiated by President Putin. Alexei Navalny, a political activist and 2013 candidate for Moscow mayor, gained a wide following by exposing corrupt officials on his blog. In recent years, he has been charged with numerous crimes that many consider politically motivated. In 2014 he faced embezzlement charges for which he was placed under house arrest with a suspended sentence of 3.5 years, while his brother Oleg is serving a 3.5 year prison sentence for the same alleged crime. Since then, Navalny has cut off his monitoring bracelet and defied his house arrest. See Diana Evdokimova, “The Hunt for ‘Foreign Agents’ Has Ended,” Novye Izvestiya, March 12, 2014, www.newizv.ru/society/2014-03-12/198439-predsedatel-pravozashitnoj-associacii-agora-pavel-chikov.html.


23. The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations, 25.

In 1917, the metropolitan elites and populace of St. Petersburg toppled the Russian Empire and deposed the tsar. The tsar tried to defend himself with the help of Cossacks summoned from the provinces and of the Black Hundreds, an ultranationalist movement that rejected any retreat from autocracy. In 1991, the metropolitan elites and populace of Moscow toppled the Soviet empire and deposed the State Committee on the State of Emergency leaders, even though the leaders appealed to the provincial party and military chiefs and demanded that they surround the city to quell the protest. In 2013, forces amassed in the capitals of Russia and Ukraine to topple Vladimir Putin’s empire. In response, the Russian president is turning to his Chechen henchmen and the workers of the Nizhny Tagil Uralvagonzavod plant for support.¹

The Moscow mayoral election of September 2013 exposed, on one hand, the unexpected ability of the citizenry to self-organize on an unprecedented scale and, on the other, the response of the authorities—first frightened, then repressive. In the case of Kiev, Maidan as a public self-organizing system overthrew President Viktor Yanukovych’s power vertical.

In Moscow, where the processes have not yet boiled over, there is largely invisible consolidation and regrouping of public forces trying to defend civic interests against Putin’s power vertical. This process is evinced by the emergence of alternative self-governing entities that implement and protect the rights of the public where the power
vertical cannot or will not do so.

By gradually eroding the foundations of the Putin power vertical, the rise of these alternatives reveals the hostility, inefficiency, and incompetence of the regime as far as the public is concerned. Let us examine a few examples.

**Citizen Oversight of Elections**

The feeling that elections in Russia are rigged has been brewing for a long time. In the tradition of the rigidity of opinions so characteristic of the Russian intelligentsia, there have been two completely opposite views about the problem. The first one has held the elections to be absolutely false, engineered by a bloody regime, and that whether you vote or not, you are screwed anyway. Consequently, taking part in elections is like being an accomplice. Thus, boycott them!

The other position has been that election results reflect the deep-seated attitudes of the people, who are said to be filled with a yearning for the strong arm. Yes, there may have been some vote rigging, but it is a shame to engage in electoral nit picking when at stake is the future of a thousand-year-old nation rising from its knees!

Neither side was too keen on properly assessing the scale and impact of the falsification. In one of the two camps, such research was considered to be a sign of conformism and collaborationism with the corrupt regime, while the other camp viewed such an endeavor as ideological subversion for the sake of enemies across the ocean. Meanwhile, the idea was quite simple: it would suffice to monitor a representative sample of a small number of polling stations (for example, 5 percent of the total number), use legal means to minimize falsifications there, and then compare the results of this benchmark sample with the voting outcomes at the remaining 95 percent of the election precincts, where there is no independent oversight of the creative endeavors of electoral commissions.

Despite its transparent logic and repeated reports in the press, the selective-oversight project—initially called Five Percent of Truth—did not immediately invite large-scale interest, just like the elections themselves or, for that matter, politics in general. Then, all of
a sudden, about six months before the December 2011 State Duma (lower house of parliament) elections, it did. Apparently, something had changed deep in the public consciousness—at least in Moscow.

In the run-up to the Duma elections in December 2011, I was approached by a group of activists, predominantly consisting of middle-aged and older individuals with previous experience working in Moscow’s district election commissions (DECs). They claimed to have been tired of the lies and wanted to try honest sampling, something they had read about in foreign newspapers and on the web. The idea of selective statistical oversight was also supported by the GOLOS (Voice) Association, whose experts worked hard to prepare and train volunteer election observers.

Most surprisingly, the project got a major push from the younger generation, who had previously held an emphatically don’t-give-a-damn position or supported the Putin regime through official structures like the Nashi (Ours) youth movement. In the end—without money or office space and solely thanks to the enthusiasm of the volunteers and pro bono support from academic, public, and several party and media entities—everything somehow worked out.

Special thanks are in order to Novaya Gazeta (NG), which dared to provide communications support for the project and to issue mandates to hundreds of strangers assigning them to work as media representatives at polling stations. Amidst this creative process of self-organization, during which its spontaneous leaders unexpectedly demonstrated remarkable organizational skills, the project adopted the name Citizen Observer. The new title was probably in reference to a then-popular project, Citizen Poet, launched by the writer and poet Dmitry Bykov on the Internet and on the Dozhd independent TV network, indirectly confirming the growing role played by alternative information in shaping new civil communities.

As a result, in December 2011 volunteers from Citizen Observer managed to monitor 131 out of a total 3,374 DECs in Moscow. (The results are shown in figure 1.) The volunteers were unlawfully chased away from another 25 DECs that had been put on the original watch list. The average results for the United Russia party in the benchmark sample of 131 Moscow DECs was 16 to 17 percentage
points (about 30 percent) lower than what was officially announced for Moscow as a whole (46.6 percent).

Additionally, the results of the Citizen Observer sample were very close to the average of the 250 Moscow polling stations that were monitored with the help of electronic scanners known as automated vote counting systems (AVCS), which generate a parallel vote-counting report that is hard to edit or embellish. Figure 2 shows the electoral results collected at stations with AVCS, while figure 3 shows the stark disparity between official election results released by Central Election Committee and the data collected at polling stations with AVCSs. In other words, AVCSs, along with the presence of active observers at polling stations, considerably limited the potential magnitude of falsification, even though they cannot eliminate it completely.

Judging by the benchmark sample and the polling stations equipped with AVCSs (a total of 381 DECs out of 3,374, or more
**Figure 2**

Results at Polling Stations with Scanning Devices (Moscow)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Turnout</th>
<th>Voters</th>
<th>Polling Stations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Just Russia</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
<td>408,554</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Democratic Party of Russia</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patriots of Russia</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communist Party of the Russian Federation</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yabloko</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Russia</td>
<td>29.9%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right Cause</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voided Ballots</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author's calculations.

**Figure 3**

Results According to the Russian Federation's Central Election Committee (Moscow)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Turnout</th>
<th>Voters</th>
<th>Polling Stations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Just Russia</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>7,194,550</td>
<td>3,374</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Democratic Party of Russia</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patriots of Russia</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communist Party of the Russian Federation</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yabloko</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Russia</td>
<td>46.6%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right Cause</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voided Ballots</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author's calculations.

Note: The dotted line shows the results from the polling stations equipped with scanning devices.
than 11 percent), one-third of the total vote cast in favor of the party in power turned out to have been simply thrown in at the voting booths, where there were no Citizen Observer volunteers or other constraints to vote rigging. While these results were rather predictable for independent experts, the differences came as a major shock to volunteers who, for the first time, had a chance to see with their own eyes how blatant and primitive Putin’s power vertical was in making up favorable election results.

The discovery made a strong impression. Described by hundreds of volunteers in blogs and other online media, this information spread through Moscow like wildfire. What happened was akin to a sociocultural fracture, and a deep one at that. Whereas previously maybe three to four experts had written about the falsifications—and they could be ignored, misunderstood (after all, not every reader takes an interest in mathematical statistics), or their integrity questioned—after December 2011 the problem became a hot talking point for large web audiences literally overnight.

That proved to be enough for the capital to be swept up in a mass movement on a scale unseen in the past 20 years. It was silly, of course, to look for a conspiracy orchestrated by internal or external enemies, as Putin’s power vertical suggested right away. The explanation was much simpler and more fascinating: the city as a sociocultural entity had grown up. Generational, information technology–related, educational, household, and communication changes accumulated and blended into a qualitatively new phenomenon that all of a sudden spilled out into the open.

Notably, this new phenomenon went outside the established political framework. The protest can hardly be described as leftist, rightist, liberal, or nationalist; it simply involved the entire city. An alternative movement quickly found its alternative leader. The young and defiant anticorruption blogger Alexei Navalny, despite having no party affiliation, immediately rose to stardom.

Many were highly enthusiastic about the simplicity and efficiency of citizen control. Winter 2011–12 saw the emergence of several new volunteer groups whose membership exceeded that of NG: Rosvybory, Sonar, Observers of St. Petersburg, and the Voters’ League.
They were distinguished by their metropolitan location (major cities), lack of partisan affiliations, and nonideological, project-based approach. People of different convictions organized into self-governing groups to deal with a task clearly understood by all, limited in time, and addressing a limited set of objectives, ensuring an honest vote counting.

The government establishment responded in its usual manner by launching a campaign of harassment and defamation against GOLOS on the grounds that it received funding from the US Agency for International Development. However, the regime struggled to find fault with Citizen Observer and other purely nongovernment organizations because they did not receive any funding beyond small donations from their own activists and sympathizers.

Therefore, along with reprisals, Putin’s bureaucracy was forced to limit the scope of its most flagrant (and most effective) mechanisms of falsification that had guaranteed it victories at the polls in the past. This limitation was confined to Moscow, the only Russian region to demonstrate an actual ability to counter electoral fraud.

As a result, three months later, during the March 2012 presidential elections, the capital city had no repeated cases of nocturnal falsifications that had so outraged Muscovites in December. This technique boiled down to simply rewriting the protocols after election commission members left for the day. Naturally, this method can only work if election commission members and observers are completely unable (or, more often, unwilling because of a reluctance to get into trouble) to know and defend their legitimate rights. The new generation of volunteer monitors did not suffer from this Soviet obedience syndrome. Therefore, the authorities had to take a step to meet them halfway (or half a step, to be more precise).

Instead, primitive nocturnal falsification gave way to a wide range of less blatant (but also less effective) daytime forms of electoral fraud: the so-called “carousel voting,” whereby a bus with voters for hire travels from one polling station to another and its passengers cast multiple votes with the connivance of the Kremlin-dependent DEC management; voting by the lists of a continuous cycle of production enterprises whose workers are ostensibly unable to leave
their workplaces to vote; home “voting”; or absentee ballots.

But all of these efforts are, first, harder to disguise, as they largely happen right in front of other voters and, second, yield a far poorer aggregate harvest of additional votes than the simple doctoring of protocols in the quiet of the night when nobody is watching or interfering. At best, the carousel and other daytime activities may yield several dozen, or up to 100, additional votes at a given polling station.

As a result, in Moscow Putin could not win in the first round of the March 2012 presidential election: he garnered only 47 percent of the votes, according to the official data. The protected polling stations gave him about 45 percent. Unlike in December, the gap was small, virtually within the statistical discrepancy range. Notably, even this number has a share of daytime falsification: the observers did record cases of ballot-box stuffing and carousels. Therefore, Putin’s true result in Moscow was probably more like 40 percent.

The Moscow authorities launched a counterattack and decided to quell the protests with the help of a provocation. Thanks to the efforts of agents provocateurs on both sides—the revolutionaries and gendarmes found one another yet again, to mutual satisfaction—the peaceful May 6, 2012, demonstration by citizens who demanded compliance with the election law was reformatted into a street scuffle. The authorities used this as a pretext for prosecuting dozens of activists, the so-called “Bolotnaya prisoners,” named after Bolotnaya Square in Moscow where the clashes took place.

At the same time, the Moscow authorities took steps to hold an unprecedentedly honest mayoral election on September 8, 2013. For that purpose, the leader of the outside-the-system Moscow opposition, Navalny, was released from jail in the Kirov region (about 1,000 kilometers northeast of Moscow). The mayor’s office, with a nod from the presidential administration, even helped him register as a candidate.

From the regime’s point of view, the results were mixed. Navalny’s share of the vote was unpleasantly high for the authorities and formally confirmed his status as Moscow’s second-most-important politician. On the other hand, street protests were successfully calmed
down, at least for the time being. During the September 2013 mayoral election, independent observers demonstrated even stronger cohesion by monitoring 63 percent of Moscow’s polling stations, or about 16 times as many as in December 2011.

The voting results in the notional white zone of the city (the 63 percent of all DECs that the observers managed to monitor) substantially differ from the outcomes recorded in the grey zone (the 37 percent of all DECs where there was no citizen oversight). Figure 4 shows the geographic distribution of monitored and unmonitored polling stations throughout Moscow.

**Civil Society Fills the Vacuum**

Annoyed by the old-time ideologues of all hues—with their irksome and sometimes self-interested grandiloquence—the new citizenry do not want rhetoric; instead, they want specific steps designed to improve their lives. Naturally, these steps are often misperceived; some view them as rightist, others as leftist. But the most significant development is the emergence of new, hitherto unknown, and often
formally imperceptible civic groups united in a pragmatic effort to solve a shared specific problem outside the realm of ideological predilections.

One example is the movement of angry motorists (Blue Buckets), which includes both left-wingers and right-wingers, nationalists, and liberals among its members. They are all equally angered by the traffic jams in which one may be stuck for hours only to watch government limos with blue rooftop flashers swish by. Indignation at the corrupt regime and self-important bureaucracy knows no partisan affiliations. The same goes for courts and law-enforcement agencies held on a short leash by their bosses in the power vertical.

Civic mobilization is an objective process. The new social, property, and information status of citizens puts them in contact with the judiciary and the administrative system more often than during the Soviet era. No matter through which ideological lens one may choose to view these issues, pragmatic commonality of interest forces ideological differences to take a back seat: issues with immigration, the environment, security, pensions, education, health, traffic congestion, and corruption make everyone unhappy, regardless of differing value systems and cognitive mechanisms. There is a similar situation with vote counting, with nonpartisan actors, Communists, Yabloko and Green party members, right-wing liberals, nationalists, and anarchists volunteering to become election monitors.

The battles over partisan ideals fought in the 1990s have receded into the background. Current protests stem from the practical needs of a new, evolving class of citizens. They need institutions that effectively protect their broadened interests and rights. The system of vertical management, designed to protect the monopolist interests of Putin’s nomenclature, cannot offer such institutions, hence the attempts to establish alternative civil entities at the grassroots level.

Thus, as the head of Russia’s Central Election Commission, Vladimir Churov—a tragicomic ex-KGB officer and Putin’s close associate since the early 1990s when they both worked in the mayor of Leningrad’s office—has been unwilling or unable to organize an honest
tally of the votes. Moscow established an alternative system, implemented by 10,000 qualified volunteers willing to work for free.\(^3\)

As the traffic police are unwilling and unable to ensure a level playing field for all drivers, the Blue Buckets group has emerged and already collected more than 100,000 signatures against cars with the blue flashing lights. Russian law requires an initiative with so many signatures to be considered by the State Duma. However, the legislature has dragged its feet on the issue for more than a year.

While the Higher Attestation Commission is unwilling and unable to put an end to the business of selling fake dissertations that enabled hundreds, if not thousands, of members of Putin’s nomenclature to convert their bureaucratic clout into doctorates, an alternative civil network, Dissernet, has emerged that is closely connected to the opposition journalist Sergei Parkhomenko. It rigorously and elegantly proves cases of plagiarism in doctorates held by key political actors.

As the police and courts are unwilling and unable to crack down on corruption because it guarantees the loyalty of regional and other elites in Putin’s corporation, antigraft efforts have been assumed by the civil Anti-Corruption Foundation established by Navalny.\(^4\) The official media is unwilling and unable to meet international standards of quality and journalistic ethics as they carry out an order to provide propaganda support for the military campaign in Ukraine. But people need objective information; they are annoyed by propaganda lies. As a result, first in the blogosphere and then in alternative media outlets, including Svoboda and NG, something like courts of public opinion have appeared to deal with propagandistic subversion and falsifications.\(^5\)

**The Regime’s Response**

We are witnessing, on one hand, a growing conflict between the interests of an advanced urban population and, on the other, a corporatist institution of administrative resource—inefficient, corrupt, and free of any responsibility to the electorate (as elections are falsified). The Kremlin is afraid that Kiev, as a capital that managed to topple a corrupt corporation of power, may set a precedent for
Moscow to follow. These fears are justified. So far, however, Kiev and Moscow have used different approaches and methods. So the Russian authorities are trying to dampen the conflict in two ways: they are trying to improve, to the extent they can, their efficiency by making small concessions to citizens and, at the same time, they are persistently destroying, discrediting, and suppressing alternatives growing out of a burgeoning civil society.

An example of the former approach is the dismissal of the scandalously corrupt Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, the head of the Luzhkov-Baturina clan, in 2010, followed by the attempt in September 2013 at a more honest Moscow mayoral election. The election was indeed perceptibly cleaner than the Moscow City Duma elections of 2009 or the State Duma elections of 2011. True, they were far from aseptic—that is, completely free of contaminants—as Sergei Ivanov, the presidential chief of staff, put it.

Table 1's data comparing Moscow's polling stations with independent oversight (see first column) to polling stations without independent oversight (see second column) reveal that the incumbent mayor Sergei Sobyanin's first-round victory over Navalny was questionable. If Navalny had forced Sobyanin into a second-round runoff by preventing the incumbent from securing more than 50 percent of the vote in the first round, the situation might have become difficult for authorities to predict and control. And so Sobyanin was helped to his 51.4 percent victory in the first round by the grey electoral zone, in which his final tally was 54.3 percent.

Examples of the regime's other, repressive course of action include its persecution of Pussy Riot, the regime's campaign of reprisals against Navalny and the May 6 Bolotnaya prisoners, and the destruction of independent media outlets. The last-mentioned campaign, to name just a few instances, included coordinated attacks on TV Dozhd, with an audience of 20 million viewers; the transformation of RIA Novosti from the best news service in Russia into an out-and-out propaganda mouthpiece; and the replacement of the chief editor of the popular news website Lenta.ru. Consistent with this strategy are manipulations of the election legislation, including new restrictions on independent monitoring.
Conclusion

Vladimir Putin is the president of the periphery, based on even the falsified data of the Central Election Commission. In the latest elections, large cities’ support for him was 10 to 15 percentage points lower than the provinces’ support. In Moscow and Kaliningrad, he never made it beyond the first round, having received only 47 percent of the votes in each of the cities. He received the highest percentage of the vote in the depressed outlying republics: 99.8 percent in Chechnya, 92.8 percent in Dagestan, 91.9 percent in Ingushetia, and 90 percent in Tyva.

Big cities are centers of growth and innovation. Putin is entering into a systemic conflict with both phenomena, most notably in Moscow. He is emulating, most likely unknowingly, the chairman of the Communist Party of Russia, Gennady Zyuganov, a leader from the old Soviet nomenclature. Relying on Russia’s social and geographical periphery to fill out his base is a hopeless strategy that will only lead Putin into a dead end and, regrettably, drag Russia along with him.

An attempt to bring a Europeanized Ukraine back into Putin’s pet project, the Eurasian Union, ended in a major geostrategic fiasco and a desperate effort to camouflage it at home with the help of
a victorious Crimean intervention. The same, albeit on a different scale, is happening to Moscow. As Muscovites’ growing list of complaints against a stagnating authoritarian power vertical will only become longer, the Kremlin will thus be forced to try to politically overwhelm Moscow by appealing to the conservative periphery. The looser his grip on Moscow, the more dependent he will become on Ramzan Kadyrov’s Chechnya and other preserves of his regime’s vertical conservatism. There is no alternative, for any such alternative would imply relinquishing the monopoly over power and property, something the regime’s corporation will not do.

The era of small concessions is over, and the Kremlin will instead pursue the second, more oppressive course over the next few months or years. As a result, the open, visible conflict between the practical needs of the Europeanized strata of Russian society (first and foremost, Moscow), on one hand, and the policies of the Putin establishment, on the other, may be suppressed and forced deeply below the surface of the allowable public debate, at least for some time. But it will not disappear.

On the contrary, the threat of the conflict boiling over will rise. The failures of Putin’s Ukraine strategy, which are misperceived as domestic achievements because of the state’s total control of the media, and Russia’s worsening economic problems will only speed up the process.

A weakness of the civil society alternatives developing in Russia’s nascent but growing civil society is their reliance on Moscow, the Internet, and a small number of strong, charismatic personalities who the regime could easily isolate (just like the Internet, as a matter of fact). At the same time, their strength lies in their flexibility and related intangibility, innovative thinking, ability to self-finance, efficiency, growing social support, and independence from the bureaucratic hierarchy.

In the end, Moscow will win because capitals always win. This process cannot be reversed, but it can be retarded. The regime could, for instance, try to destroy the spirit of the capital to the point that it is indistinguishable from the periphery, as Stalin did to Leningrad or the Khmer Rouge to Phnom Penh. But those were painful
exceptions, not to say perversions. The chess match between the
Russian president and Moscow is entering its endgame. It is not
likely to be peaceful.

Notes

1. During a December 2011 call-in show with Putin, Igor Kholman-
skikh, a foreman at the Uralvagonzavod tank factory, volunteered to bring
a group of his coworkers to Moscow to clear the streets of protesters if the
police proved unable to do so. See “Putin Reaches Down to the Assembly


3. “Moscow Mayor Election Results: The Rating of the People’s Elec-
itogi_vyborov_mera_moskvy_otsenka_nabljudatelej-351744/.


5. “Falsifications of Russian Propaganda,” Rado Freedom, June 5, 2014,
www.svoboda.org/media/photogallery/25411127.html; and Maria Epi-
politics/63948.html.

6. Yuri Luzhkov served as Moscow’s mayor from 1992 to 2010. Elena
Baturina, his wife and the former owner of the Inteko construction com-
pany and Verkhnebakansk cement factory, is widely suspected of using her
husband’s political position to benefit her business interests en route to
becoming one of Russia’s richest women.
Islamic Challenges to Russia, from the Caucasus to the Volga and the Urals

ALEXEY MALASHENKO

While the Russian state and society have grown accustomed to the religious and political radicalism that has plagued the North Caucasus since the end of the 1980s, the growing trend toward radicalism in Russia’s other predominantly Muslim regions, and in areas with Muslim minorities, was entirely unexpected. The Tatars and the Bashkirs seemed so Russified and their Islamic tradition so weak compared to that of the North Caucasus that the very issue of the radicalization of Islam and its politicization in the Volga River basin seemed almost artificial.

But in the first decade of the 21st century, the situation there and in some other regions where Muslims live began to change: radical views gained currency, and radical groups and study circles became active. There were demonstrations in Tatarstan in support of the Islamists in the Middle East (especially in Syria and, since 2014, in Iraq). The term “Caucasization of Tatarstan” has emerged to describe the changes in the largest Muslim republic of the Volga basin.

According to the 2002 Russian census, there were 14.5 million ethnic Muslims in Russia. The country’s Muslim population has grown over the past 12 years since then and is likely to be approaching (if not already exceeding) 16 million. In 1937, Muslims accounted for 5.9 percent of the population of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Federation; in 1989, 1994, and 2009, their respective shares were 7.9 percent, 9 percent, and approximately 11 percent (this includes citizens of the Russian Federation only).\(^1\) Adding the migrants from Central Asia and Azerbaijan would bring the...
total Muslim population of the Russian Federation up to roughly 20 million. It is this number that is most frequently quoted by Russian politicians, including President Vladimir Putin.

This estimate of Russia’s Muslim population is still approximate because the same individuals may be registered, say, in Dagestan and Moscow, where they have moved in search of a better life. (The number of Muslims in the capital hovers around 1.5 million.) There are 7 million Muslims living in the North Caucasus, and slightly more than that in the rest of Russia. In Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, Muslims account for 53 and 48 percent of the population, respectively. In 2010, Rosstat (a Russian statistics agency) published data suggesting that the largest Muslim groups in Russia were the Tatars, Bashkirs, and Chechens, with populations of 5.3 million, 1.6 million, and 1.04 million, respectively.²

There is no such thing as a uniform Russian Islam. No united Muslim community (ummah) is to be found in Russia; rather, there are two subsets—those from the North Caucasus and those from Tatar-Bashkir areas. (The Tatars also live in the Urals, Siberia, Moscow, and other regions.) The two largest Muslim areas have different histories and different social and cultural parameters: North Caucasus–based Muslims are more traditional than Tatars, who survived the Russian Empire and then went through an even tougher process of Soviet assimilation. The history of the Tatars and Tatar Islam is so different that it may be argued that “Living on the border between the West and the East, geographically and culturally, the Tatars created their own sub-civilization.”³

Following the breakup of the USSR, both Muslim domains have seen trends that can be described as the politicization and radicalization of Islam or, rather, the proliferation of its nontraditional interpretations, often referred to as Wahhabism, Salafism, fundamentalism, and Islamism. In the North Caucasus, Wahhabism and Salafism were considerably more pronounced and influential in terms of the local political situation and the region’s relations with the federal center. In addition to other social and economic causes, the two Chechen Wars (1993–96 and 1999–2003) magnified religious radicalism and extremism.
In Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, the situation remained relatively calm. Religious radicalism among the Tatars and the Bashkirs was sporadic. The only relatively large radical organization was the Ittifaq movement, owing its fame to founding leader Fauziya Bayramova, a popular poetess. Interestingly, the Chechen jihad was not popular among the Tatars. There were only a few dozen Tatars fighting with the separatists during the two Chechen Wars, compared to the several hundred Arab jihadists (mujahedeen).

Up until 2010 or so, the radical branch of Islam in the Volga-Urals region—including in Tatarstan, the Islamic heart of Russia—was closely monitored by the authorities. Moreover, it seemed at times that Mintimer Shaimiev (to a larger extent) and Murtaza Rakhimov—former presidents of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, respectively—leveraged the manifestations of radical Islam in their relations with the federal center. Shaimiev, for instance, could easily scare Moscow by invoking the threat of Islamic radicalism, reminding central authorities that only he could keep the radicals at bay, thus ensuring stable interethnic and interfaith relations on a key subject of the Russian Federation.

Traditional Islam and the Tatar and Bashkir Communities

By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the religious situation in the Tatar and Bashkir communities changed. This period saw the emergence of a new generation of Muslims with a keener sense of religious identity who had grown disillusioned with Hanafi Islam—the school that is traditional for the Tatars. They were more interested in a different kind of Islam—one not linked to ethnic or pagan traditions, geared toward political action, and ready to respond to today’s obstacles and to challenge other civilizations and cultures.

As a religious and cultural phenomenon, traditional Islam is losing its authority, and weakening with it is the influence of its ideologists and preachers from among the Muslim clergy, and secular politicians who see the local religious tradition as a barrier to the spread of radical sentiments. Supporters of national-traditional
Islam are to be found mostly among the middle-aged and, especially, older generations.

Another problem is that supporters of traditional Islam cannot clearly define it or offer an attractive image of it to Russia’s Muslim community. Valiulla Yakupov—Tatarstan’s most prominent ideologist of traditional Islam, who was assassinated in July 2012—sincerely equated traditional Islam with the Tatar version of Hanafism, which he extended to all of Russian Islam, and believed that Hanafism “might become the attractive ideal for the realization of prescriptions for Islam’s existence in secular forms.”

Yakupov feared the cultural dissolution of the Tatars, something that he believed to have been largely facilitated by Islamic interpretations from abroad. “Regrettably,” he wrote, “for the time being, modern Tatars are showing devotion to the empty and abstractly contemplative version of Islam—so extraneous to them—that is built on an unconscious adherence to the letter rather than the substance of religious texts and on blind taqlid [unquestioning acceptance of others’ opinions, imitation].”

Yakupov and his followers demanded that Friday prayers be held in Tatar, not in Russian. However, there was nothing nationalistic about their demand; rather, it was prompted by an understandable desire to preserve their ethnic religious tradition. At the same time, a sermon delivered in Tatar is justly believed to hinder the formation of a Russian Muslim community. Back in the 1990s, Vali Ahmet Sadur, a founder of the Islamic Revival Party, noted that Russia’s Muslims were “still more focused on ethnic partitions rather than on being part of a united ummah.”

During the Communist era, most Soviet Tatar Muslims practicing “traditional Islam” were Muslim only nominally. A lack of discipline in performing rituals and a pervasive nonobservance of taboos were eroding the religious domain, turning Islam into “a relic of the past,” to use a Soviet propaganda cliché. “The Tatars have weak religious devotion,” Yakupov noted. In comparison to other Muslim peoples of the USSR, they were the ones whose religion was most seriously damaged.

The Soviet authorities treated Tatar Islam almost as cruelly as they treated Russian Orthodoxy. The overwhelming majority of mosques
were destroyed: before 1917, there were more than 15,000 in what is now Russia; by 1956, only 94 remained.\textsuperscript{8} The system of religious education was destroyed, and thousands of Islamic clergy (\textit{mullahs}) were purged. For the assimilated Tatars, surrounded by Slavs on all sides, Islam almost ceased to be a regulator of social relations.

On the other hand, Umar Idrisov, former head of the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of the Nizhni Novgorod Region, believes that “Unlike their fellow Muslims abroad, Russian Muslims are Europeans, who grew up with traditional all-Russian values, including Christian ones.”\textsuperscript{9} This is consistent with a view held by Rafael Khakimov, a Tatar politician and scholar who has always emphasized the outstanding contribution the Tatars made to the development of Muslim civilization by advancing the idea of Euro-Islam as the only alternative to religious conservatism and fundamentalism.

A simplified version of traditional Islam has also been proposed by Imam Farid Salman, who believes that traditional Islam means precisely the kind of Islam that has been known since the times of Prophet Muhammad.\textsuperscript{10} Traditional Islam is also referred to as “official Islam” as opposed to “unofficial Islam,” represented by various religious groups that are “opposed to the traditional structures.”\textsuperscript{11}

Confronted after the breakup of the USSR with new and hitherto unthinkable social, political, and cultural challenges—especially the religious revival—traditional Islam proved unprepared for them. In the North Caucasus, traditional Islam was defended by the influential Sufi sects, orders, or brotherhoods (\textit{tarikats}) that were deeply ingrained in the fabric of society: Naqshbandi, Qadyryya, and Shazilyya. Yet, the largely Europeanized and urbanized Tatar population in most cases remained relatively indifferent to their ancestral religion, although they were undoubtedly happy to see mosques being opened, and embraced an opportunity to publicly perform religious rites.

Ravil Gaynutdin, chairman of the Russian Muftis Council and chief imam of Moscow’s Jameh Mosque, believes that the revival of Islam that began after 1991 is best described as the “legalization of Islam.” He is right, in his own way, because Islam in Russia never died, and initially, that renaissance essentially meant liberating
believers and empowering them to legally adhere to their creed, openly and without any restrictions.

However, the changes in the Russian Muslim society could not be limited to the legalization of Islam. Traditional Islam needed to be legalized, but for its full revival Russian Muslims had to be reinstated as full-fledged members of the global ummah and participate in its cultural, religious, and, inevitably, political life. Revival therefore included an encounter with and introduction to a different, nontraditional strain of Islam, something that Russian Muslims could not possibly have avoided. While during Soviet times traditional Islam was opposed to the secular atheistic authorities, now its main opponent is that other, nontraditional Islam.

The Salafi Movement

What is nontraditional Islam, often called “Islamism,” “fundamentalism,” “Wahhabism,” and, more recently, “Salafism”? It is a religious movement whose followers advocate the re-Islamization of society; return to the canons of Islam; strict observance of the rites, taboos, and code of conduct; and, finally, Islam’s involvement in politics. Their objective is to form a kind of Islamic space or an independent Islamic state—an emirate or caliphate.

Yuldash Yusupov, a Bashkir ethnologist, says that “Salafism cannot be regarded as a disease suffered by our society. It is an element of the religious development process. . . . Salafism is a religious system for the young. . . . Salafist jamaats are more open than we think.”

Salafism as a religious phenomenon has existed throughout the entire history of Islam, and it would be wrong to regard it as a distortion of or deviation from Islam, as the traditionalist ideologists tend to do. The Salafi movement has always been in opposition to state-sponsored official Islam. Its supporters fought to overcome the vestiges of paganism. They would not recognize the pluralism of Islamic schools of law (madhhabs) and the Sufi teaching, promoting “true Islam,” which they associated with the Islam of the eighth century as it was during the times of Prophet Muhammad and his closest associates. The Salafists are proponents of a religious ideology
of protest, and it is only natural that their protest is most graphically manifest in problematic or crisis-ridden situations—something we are witnessing today.

Traditional Islam and Salafism are legitimate movements within the Muslim religion, and it would be meaningless or even dangerous to try to eradicate them. The division of Islam into traditional and nontraditional domains is largely notional. In fact, both the traditionalists and the Salafists are proponents of the Islamic way of life, including of Sharia as the regulator of life and the foundation of behavioral rules for men and women. It is true that there is a wide gap between the traditionalists and the Salafists, but it appears that a bridge is beginning to gradually emerge between them, although so far the movement across that bridge has been slow and inconsistent.

Salafism, or Wahhabism, increasingly appears in the Volga-Urals region, and not just in Tatarstan or Bashkortostan but also in the adjacent areas—the regions of the Volga, Urals, Siberia, and the northern borderlands of the country, including the oil- and gas-producing subjects of the Federation.

Salafism features both moderate and radical schools, and the latter are not averse to extremism. Although Salafism continued to proliferate throughout the 2000s, its proliferation remained relatively unnoticeable and, to a greater extent, affected the religious life of Muslims and was not politicized. Thus, there was a growing struggle for mosques that were increasingly claimed by the followers of Salafism as dozens of graduates from Islamic universities and schools in the Middle East returned home.

**Radicalization in 2000–10.** The first wave of radical Salafi activism came in the early 2000s. In 2003, Salafists established an assembly (*jamaat*) in the Nuralt district of Tatarstan. Its founders tried to emulate the famous Dagestani *jamaat* of the 1990s that was comprised of four villages (Karamakhi, Chabanmakhi, Chankurbe, and Kadar) where Sharia order was installed. The *jamaat* in Dagestan, the so-called “Kadar Zone,” was destroyed by the Russian Interior Ministry’s troops and the regular armed forces in 1999.
The members of the Nurlat *jamaat* settled in an abandoned village and lived in isolation from the rest of the world. The *jamaat* proved to be short lived and failed to affect the religious situation in the region in any meaningful way. Without significant trouble it was closed down by the Interior Ministry of Tatarstan in 2010.

In 2005, gas pipelines were blown up in Kumkor, on the border between Tatarstan and the Kirov region. At about the same time, there were several bombings of power transmission lines. Although most of the planned bombings were foiled by the security services, according to the Interior Ministry of Tatarstan a total of 13 terrorist attacks were carried out in 2005, including 6 in Tatarstan; 2 in each of the Bashkortostan, Kirov, and Samara regions; and 1 in the Ulyanovsk region. Those events initially seemed to be no more than isolated episodes, and their consequences seemed too insignificant to undermine stability in the region. However, they revealed the extremists’ potentially dangerous capacity.

In 2006, Doku Umarov, a Chechen who would become the self-proclaimed emir of the so-called Caucasus Emirate (*Imarat Kavkaz*) a year later, signed a decree establishing the Volga and Urals fronts. Later, in 2010, he said in one of his statements: “We will never separate the lands of the Caucasus from the Volga region. . . . We will also liberate other lands occupied by Rusnya [a derogatory Chechen term for Russia]. These include Astrakhan and the lands along the Volga that are under the hoof of the Russian kafirs [a slur term for unbelievers].” Umarov also mentioned Bashkortostan and Buryatia in a similar context.

However, Umarov’s call to open fronts beyond the North Caucasus failed to have an impact on the situation in the Muslim regions of Russia. Along with Salafism in Tatarstan, the greater Volga-Urals region also saw an uptick in operations by the Islamic Party of Liberation, or Hizb ut-Tahir (HuT), which had previously operated almost exclusively in Central Asia.

HuT made its first appearance in Tatarstan back in 1996 when one of its members, Alisher Usmanov, came to Kazan from Uzbekistan. Until HuT was banned as a terrorist organization in 2003, Usmanov had been openly proselytizing, albeit with little success.
Interestingly, there was a notable increase in interest in HuT after it was banned. In 2006, the authorities arrested 25 of its followers, eventually convicting 12.

HuT continues to seek a foothold in local mosques, including such influential ones as the Bulgar and the Marjani in Kazan. There have been instances when HuT members prevented official priests from holding a prayer or a sermon. In 2009, HuT arranged the Feast of Sacrifice (Kurban Bayram, the Tatar name for Eid al-Adha) celebrations in Kazan during which a caliphate banner was hoisted over a crowd of about 1,000 Muslims, with quite a few immigrants among them. The rally was coordinated by the imam of the Al-Ikhlas mosque in Kazan, Rustem Safin, who was under a suspended two-year sentence for his association with HuT.

Since then, the caliphate banner—and, consequently, that of HuT—has reappeared at protest rallies as the party has sought to garner support among migrants and the Tatar followers of Salafism. HuT cells exist in all of Tatarstan’s and Bashkortostan’s major cities and also permeate the Urals and Siberia. The exact number of such cells is unknown, but according to unofficial sources they operate in almost all constituent members of the Russian Federation east and southeast of the Volga.

One of the reasons for HuT’s appeal is that its charter does not require any systematic action on the part of its members, nor are they required to publicly follow the rules of conduct prescribed by Islam or constantly wear Islamic paraphernalia (beards, skull caps or turbans, or praying beads). On the contrary, HuT stipulates that its members should not differ in any way not only from other Muslims but also from all other people around them—including being excused from observing the Sharia dietary restrictions—in order to help establish contacts and conduct propaganda work. In addition, HuT has repeatedly emphasized its opposition to terrorism.

**Terrorist Attacks since 2010.** Early in the 2010s, the extremist wing of the Russian Salafi movement stepped up its operations in Tatarstan. The republic saw several high-profile terrorist attacks that affected the political situation not only in Tatarstan but also in the
entire Volgo-Urals region. In July 2012 in Kazan, Tatarstan’s Islamic scholar (mufti), Ildus Fayzov, was badly injured and his aide, Yakupov, the leading ideologist of traditional Islam, was killed. There were several theories about the purpose of the attack, including one accusing the federal center of trying to bring the Republic of Tatarstan under Moscow’s complete control. Another hypothesis supposed both attacks were the result of financial squabbles within the Spiritual Board of the Muslims of Tatarstan.

The former theory is untenable because the Kremlin had long ceased to need an excuse for vanquishing the remaining independence of regional elites. As to the second one, according to Rafik Mukhametshin, president of the Russian Islamic University in Kazan, “It would be naïve to try and explain Valiulla Yakupov’s assassination by some economically motivated squabbles. Ideologists of traditional Islam do not get killed over money.” Most likely, then, the two attacks were prompted by internal religious strife that is inseparable from the religious and political standoff in which the secular authorities take the side of the proponents of traditional Islam and, consequently, the “official” Muslim clergy. In addition, shortly after he was elected mufti in 2011, Fayzov openly stated that “In Tatarstan, a war is being waged against radical Islam,” whose victim he eventually became.

As a result, the pro-Salafist imams of Tatarstan were not particularly regretful about the attempt on Mufti Fayzov’s life. Apparently, some of the imams did not even pray for his recovery. What’s more, there was something “close to jubilance” over the incident in one of the mosques in Naberezhniye Chelny (where radical Islam had put down roots back in the 1990s). Immediately after the attempt on Fayzov, radical Islamic websites posted comments welcoming the attack. Bayramova, who sided with the Salafists in the 2000s, called Fayzov and Bayramov “the devil’s servant[s].” The detention of some 400–600 suspects shortly after the incident triggered a rally in Tatarstan, during which the HuT flags were hoisted again.

The terrorist attacks in Kazan bring to mind a series of killings of muftis, imams, and religious scholars who espoused the principles of traditional Islam and opposed radicalism in the North Caucasus,
where 57 clerics have been assassinated since 1995 (there have been a total of 68 attempted killings). After the assassination of Yakupov and the attempt on Mufti Fayazov’s life, the “Caucasuzation,” or “Dagestanization,” of Tatarstan and the entire Volga-Urals region was coined and began to be widely used by the media and expert community.

After the terrorist attacks in Kazan, the so-called “emir of the mujahedeens,” Marat Khalimov, posted a statement on the Internet announcing the beginning of an active phase of the struggle that would allegedly be fought in a densely wooded Kama River basin. A month later, a car exploded on the Kazan-Zelenodolsk highway in an apparently accidental detonation of a bomb. Inside the wreckage were the bodies of three men, guns, and radical Islamic literature. Rais Suleymanov, a researcher from Russia’s Institute of Strategic Studies, believes that at the time of the explosion in Zelenodonsk, considered one of the hot spots of radicalism, the terrorists may have been preparing an attack on Putin, who was planning a visit to Tatarstan.

In 2010–11, there were also several actions undertaken by radical Salafists in Bashkortostan. In 2011, a group of five mujahedeens from the so-called Askin jamaat raided the woods in the hills of Bashkortostan, Perm Territory, and the Sverdlovsk region. The raid produced no serious results and was a mere show of force. Nevertheless, also in 2011, the security services conducted preventive operations in the cities of Baymak and Sibay and captured four members of the Salafist jamaat, including Ilnur Zhakiryanov, the leader of the local Salafists.

The most infamous terrorist attack in the Volga-Urals region during the past two years was a missile attack against a major oil-refining facility in Nizhnekamsk on November 16, 2013. Interestingly, the attackers employed self-made Qassam rockets commonly used by Palestinians. The authorities arrested five suspects in connection with the bombing. The events in Nizhnekamsk forced Tatarstan’s authorities to pay close attention to the activity of the militants and the general security situation in the republic. While in 2012 President Rustem Minikhanov of Tatarstan had said that the “threat of radical Islam is exaggerated,” in 2014, addressing the deputies of the
Nizhnekamsk municipality, he stated that “unless we ensure stability and tranquility in this territory, no investment or investors [would be coming].”

No accurate statistics are available on the number of radicals in individual republics and regions of the Volgo-Urals area. The number usually quoted for Tatarstan is 3,000. Yakupov maintained that more than half of the young people in Tatarstan were adherents of radical Islam. Some argue that the neo-Wahhabis (Salafists) account for 2 to 10 percent of the total population of Russian Muslims. According to that estimate, there are between 300,000 and 1.5 million neo-Wahhabis in Russia.

This is clearly an overstatement. On the other hand, it would be wrong to ignore the fact that the active Salafists have a rather broad social and religious base, and some Muslims sympathize with them if only out of respect for kinship and geographic proximity, something that is primarily typical of the North Caucasus but can be found in other regions as well.

A more recent addition to the term “Salafists” is the word “Salafish” (Salafitsvuyushchie), meaning something like “Salafist-lite.” Also, in December 2013, Patriarch Kirill, the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, said there were tens of thousands of “near-Islamic radicals” living in Moscow, and their growing number is due to the influx of migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus. It is anybody’s guess how many near-Islamic radicals there may be in the Volga-Urals region.

Migration Effects on Russia’s Muslim Community

In the early 2010s, migration from Central Asia became an important factor in the life of Russia’s Muslim community. The total number of migrants, most of whom are illegal, is impossible to verify. According to various sources, the number of migrants from Uzbekistan is anywhere between 0.8 million and 1.2 million; from Tajikistan, approximately 1.0 million; and from Kyrgyzstan, 400,000–500,000. They are scattered across Russia but increasingly settling down in the Volga and Urals regions (pictured in figures 1 and 2) and in the
Figure 1
Urals Region Map

Figure 2
Volga Region Map

north of the country. In addition, there are 1.5 million Azeris in the Russian Federation, most living in the northern and northwestern regions and even in the Far East.

In the Sverdlovsk region alone, there are 216,000 Muslims (5.3 percent of the population), and according to the regional branch of the Federal Migration Service, 150,000 to 200,000 migrants register as residents every year, of which 74 percent are Muslims.\textsuperscript{27} The Muslim population of the Samara region has grown considerably. Whereas in 2002 Muslims accounted for 5.2 percent (150,000 people) of the population, their current share apparently exceeds 7 percent. According to the Azeri League of the Samara region, 10,000 immigrants from Azerbaijan have obtained Russian citizenship. The Tajik ethnocultural organization Paivand reports a very similar number.\textsuperscript{28}

Data about the distribution of migrants by region are estimates. It is quite common to base such estimates on indirect indicators and the perceptions of locals, who tend to overestimate the number of aliens who stand out, if only because they look different. According to official sources, about 1,000 children are born annually into migrant families in Tatarstan.\textsuperscript{29} This is an impressive statistic considering that the overwhelming majority of migrants are men arriving without their families. Moreover, not all (in fact probably a minority) of pregnant women turn to medical institutions for assistance.

The ethnic and religious composition of the Volga-Urals and southern regions of Russia is also changing, which is affecting the situation not only in those regions but also in the country as a whole. In 2002, Muslims accounted for 16.7 percent of the Orenburg region, 12 percent of the Chelyabinsk region, and 13 percent of the Ulyanovsk region.\textsuperscript{30} Today, the respective percentages are between 21 and 25, around 15 percent, and more than 15 percent.\textsuperscript{31} Islam is steadily approaching the Arctic coast: Muslims were 15 percent of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous District population in 2002; today, by my estimate, they constitute between 25 and 40 percent of the population.\textsuperscript{32}

Islamization became one of the prominent features of migration to Russia in the early 2010s. This means that Central Asians increasingly identify themselves as Muslims, arguing that they need
to perform religious rites and seek to follow “the Islamic way of life.” In some cities, the majority of those who attend the main Friday prayer are natives of the Caucasus, Tajiks, and Uzbeks. Since 2011, Ramadan Bayram (Ramadan) and Kurban Bayram (Eid al-Adha) have drawn crowds of tens of thousands of Muslims (from 80,000 to 100,000) to Moscow’s main mosque, most of them hailing from the Caucasus and Central Asia. Describing the situation in the capital on Kurban Bayram in 2013, a reporter wrote that “Moscow is under siege.”

33 There is already a shortage of mosques in some Russian cities. Accordingly, the Muslims have asked the city authorities to build new mosques, but generally, such requests are denied, as the local Slavic population is opposed to the idea.

Gradually, international communities have emerged in the Volga-Urals region, comprised of both Tatars and immigrants from Central Asia. Those among the migrants with at least basic religious training and a command of Arabic seek to be elected imams. There have been cases like that, including in Tatarstan, where there are already several incumbent imams of Uzbek origin. According to various sources, Tajiks account for 7 to 17 percent of all Russian imams.

34 On the other hand, these migrants bring their own—often more radical—vision of Islam into the community of local Russian Muslims. The Tatars, particularly the middle aged and elderly, resent this. Additionally, during the past five years, the Uzbek authorities have made systematic efforts to force out of the country (particularly from the Fergana Valley) religious radicals, primarily HuT followers who have moved to Russia and become comfortable there.

Conclusion

How real is the Salafist threat to security in Russia’s Volga-Urals region? There are two opposite views on this. The first is that the threat is artificial, and its discussion is being encouraged by the authorities to use the Salafism challenge as a pretext for ultimately crushing any opposition. The other view is that the threat is growing and rapidly proliferating, risking the destabilization of the region.
and, subsequently, the entire country. Those who hold the latter view are convinced that radical Islamists’ increased activity is due to outside influence coming from the North Caucasus and Middle East, and an intensified power struggle among Muslim clerics.

Exaggerating the threat, just like ignoring it, hinders the development of an adequate policy toward Muslims and Islam. In such cases it is customary to say that the truth is in the middle. Such an approach, however, seems simplistic. On the one hand, the heightened tension of 2010–12 in connection with the activities of Islamist radicals was followed by a certain drop in activity in 2013–14. With the exception of the missile attack on the refinery in Nizhnekamsk, no killings or terrorist attacks were recorded in the Volga-Urals region or adjacent territories in the last two years.

As hundreds of militants were killed or arrested in the North Caucasus, extremists have failed to scale up operations in the Volga-Urals region. In addition, the Muslim community grew wary of the radicals whose influence on most people still remains limited. Terrorist attacks such as the one in Nizhnekamsk, or the serial attack in Volgograd shortly before the Olympic Games, cause traditional Muslims to resent the attackers.

Yet, the socioeconomic and political reasons for radical sentiments among Muslims have yet to be eliminated. The younger generation remains interested in a different, nontraditional Islam, while traditional Islam is still associated with conservatism and ritualism. This is causing a deepening rift in the country’s Muslim community.

A crackdown on Salafism, which should not be automatically equated with extremism, has not produced the desired results, and the ideologists of traditional Islam—the upper crust of the educated clergy—realize that they can no longer portray traditional Islam as the only acceptable form of Islam permitted to Muslims in Russia.

In its search for a way out of the crisis, the official clergy have de facto proposed to view Islam as a dynamic sociocultural system. Says Gaynutdin:

Islam is still evolving. It is possible to modernize the conditions for Islam’s existence in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural environment
without changing its tenets. I support the renewal of Islamic teachings, those aspects that deal with the social sphere, the humanistic spheres of human life. The main tenets are unshakable, of course. They regulate the namaz, fasting, zakat, pilgrimages, relations between husband and wife, their property interests and kinship.35

Developments within the Muslim community are also being influenced by the position of the federal center. The authorities see the complexity of the processes unfolding in the Muslim community and are wary of radical sentiments that might be on the rise there. The activism of the radicals, regular terrorist attacks, Islamization of migration, exacerbated interethnic tensions, and the impact of the Arab Spring on Russia’s Muslims are forcing the authorities to develop and implement a coherent policy toward Islam and Muslims and discard the binary black-and-white stereotypes. This is even more important since, according to many experts, the country is headed toward a profound economic crisis sometime soon. If the forecast materializes, the crisis will inevitably exacerbate the already-tense interethnic and interreligious relations.

Admittedly, the authorities have from time to time recognized the importance of adjusting their Islamic policies. However, this recognition has hardly been translated into specific steps. The last time the federal center showed a desire to adjust its view on Islam and the Muslims was when, in October 2013 in Ufa, the capital of Bashkortostan, Putin met with the heads of the leading Spiritual Board of Muslims to discuss what he described as the “Islam-state relationship.”36

During the meeting, the president highlighted a number of specific problems for the Muslim community to deal with. These included socialization of Islam that, in his opinion, was the “evolution of the traditional Muslim way of life, thinking and views in accordance with the modern social reality as opposed to the ideology of the radicals.” Putin also touched on political Islam, noting that such Islam “is not necessarily negative.” These words can be interpreted as recognition of the legitimacy of religion’s involvement in politics. Putin called on Russian Muslim leaders to contribute to the
“social adaptation of those who come to Russia to live and work” and who are also Muslims. In other words, the Kremlin has noticed the Islamization of migration from Central Asia and is trying to enlist the Russian Muslim community to influence the migrants.\(^{37}\)

It is hard to say whether Putin’s address in Ufa will become a prelude to the rethinking of the state’s attitude toward Islam. One way or another, it will take a lot of time and effort by both Muslim spiritual leaders and the government to carry out the president’s wishes. And new problems are emerging. For example, the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation will inevitably give rise to the issue of the Crimean Tatars, some of whom espouse rather radical views and most of whom, in addition, are opposed to the peninsula’s secession from Ukraine.

Finally, the Muslim community in Russia is influenced by the general situation in the Muslim world—especially the consequences of the Arab Spring—from which it can never be isolated. Radical Islamism, despite a number of setbacks, is still very vibrant and has ample political and military potential.

At the time this paper was being finished, there came reports of large-scale clashes with militants in Dagestan and of the Russian soldiers blown up by mines in Chechnya. Members of Salafist cells were detained in the Volga-Urals region. The Crimean Tatars continue to worry that their situation may worsen despite Moscow’s promises to respect their interests, offering them high offices (including that of a vice premier and two ministerial positions). During his visit to Crimea in May 2014, Gaynutdin was shown many fresh graves at the Simferopol cemetery. Those were the graves of elderly people who “remembered the Stalinist deportation and took too close to heart the appearance of combat vehicles and armed men in the cities.” They were afraid of new deportation.\(^{38}\)

These fears are not entirely unfounded. The tension between the Crimean Tatars and the Russian authorities is real and is likely to grow. The unofficial parliament of the Crimean Tatars (Mejlis) has been banned, and its founder, the famous Soviet dissident Mustafa Dzhemilev, was prevented from returning to Crimea, as has been the newly elected chairman of the Mejlis, Refat Chubarov. (The Mejlis
had called on the Tatars not to participate in the referendum on joining Russia in March 2014.)

The authorities have tried to split the Tatar community by organizing the Crimean Islamic Center. Oriented toward the officially approved Russian Muslim institutions (first and foremost, those in Tatarstan), the center is supported only by 10 percent of the Crimean Tatars. At the same time, the newly installed Russian authorities in Crimea are raiding mosques in search of materials forbidden in Russia (and thus now in Crimea).

Tensions still persist in Russia’s Muslim community. The key question is whether the relative calm that had taken hold by early 2014 in the Volga-Urals region and in Russia as a whole will become a sustainable trend or will prove but a temporary lull followed by another spike in religious and political tensions.

Notes


7. Ulla, *Tatars in the Muslim Ummah of Russia*, 52.

8. See Rushan Khazrat Abbyasov, “Bor’ba s neterpimostyu I diskriminatsiy v otnoshenii musul’man” [The Battle with Intolerance and Discrimination toward Muslims], May 22, 2013, http://rushan-abbyasov.livejournal.com/34989.html; and “Contributing to Russian Statehood: An Interview with Sheikh Ravil Gaynutdin, Mufti of the Central European Region of
Russia,” VIP, 1996.


11. *Islam and Muslim Culture in the Middle Volga Region* (Kazan: Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Tatarstan, Russian Islamic University, 2002), 341.


15. Doku Umarov, who was killed in 2014, seemed a weird semimythical character incapable of any real actions, but made provocative statements (for instance, in July 2013 he issued a threat against the Sochi Olympics) that were immediately used by the authorities to tighten their control over society. I had an opportunity to discuss Umarov’s statement with Muslims in Tatarstan, Saratov, Yekaterinburg, and other cities and regions. Most of the people I talked to, beginning in 2006, had never heard about that statement, and many of them were at the time not even aware of Doku Umarov’s existence.


27. Airat Mukhametzyanov and Aleksei Starostin, Socio-Cultural Survey of Community Activities in the Urals Region—Socio-Cultural Potential of Interconfessional Dialog (Kazan: Kazan University, 2013), 299.
31. These percentages are my own estimates.
32. Roman Silantyev, Modern History of Islamic Community in Russia (Moscow: IIPK, 2005), 149.


34. Damir Mukhetdinov, head of the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Nizhni Novgorod region and deputy chairman of the Muftis Council of Russia, insisted on 17 percent in an interview granted to the author.


36. Notably, I do not believe that the term “Islam-state relations” is appropriate. However, it is often used in publications and at various conferences by members of the Muslim clergy and by scholars with a Muslim background. This suggests that they view relations between the state and Islam as a reality and consequently as something that can be analyzed and researched.


Conclusion

It is not easy to summarize a collection as diverse and detailed as this one. Still, several themes have crystallized and ought to be at least briefly mentioned.

To start, there seems to be a consensus among the authors with respect to the watershed year of 2012. It marked not only the end of the “political equilibrium” based on the stable growth of personal income, on the one hand, and a steady narrowing of democratic participation, on the other, but also a sharp shift in the foundation of the regime’s legitimacy from economic growth to what might be called “patriotic mobilization.

This change in the general direction of the Putin regime is described by the authors in proximate terms as “antimodernization and isolationism,” “counterrevolution,” “traditionalism,” and the promotion of “Russia’s special path,” the “conservative wave,” repression, “the sterilization of politics,” and “a war on civil society.”

The economic crisis has exacerbated the cracks in loyalty to the regime, which had to resort to what Zubarevich calls the inculcation of the “postimperial syndrome” to shore up legitimacy. This strategy has worked thus far. But, as Rogov suggests, in abandoning the status quo by launching a “preventive reactionary campaign,” Putin broke with the previous modus operandi and fashioned a far more uncertain, “conflict-ridden” scenario.

In the meantime, the regime’s aggressive foreign policy performs a key domestic political function. As Guriev points out, it is “easier to justify economic hardship” when surrounded by alleged “enemies.” In that sense, the possibility of an expanded war on Ukraine or on another (most likely Baltic) neighboring state cannot be excluded if Russia’s economic situation worsens. Yet the longer-term costs of Crimean annexation and the proxy war on
Ukraine are likely to be very high because of the negative impact on investors’ confidence.

Even with a rebound in oil prices, long-term and robust economic growth is unlikely to return without a radical improvement in the country’s business climate. However, the obstacles to the institutional reforms necessary for such progress have grown considerably since the “hybrid” war on Ukraine. In Guriev’s view, “nationalist and imperialistic ideology” is reigning regardless of the damage to the economy, while censorship and propaganda aim to block the reality of the true state of affairs from reaching the people.

As Makarenko points out, the success of the regime’s “propaganda blitz” has proved “paternalism and the rudiments of Cold War mentality” to be very much alive in Russia and to constitute an enormous obstacle to the development of its civic culture. Amidst the thus-far-successful patriotic mobilization and the “Crimea-is-ours” hysteria, the title of Oreshkin’s chapter, “Moscow Will Swallow Putin,” almost seems to belong to another era.

This forecast is all the more problematic since, as Makarenko points out, the regime views civic culture “not merely as a competitor but also a potential source of regime delegitimation.” As a result, much, if not most, of the reactionary policies implemented since Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012 were aimed at demoralizing civil society and undermining its ability to self-organize politically.

Yet, it is hard to disagree with Makarenko that “civic culture already exists” in Russia. And, fortunately for Russia, the choice of whether it continues to exist is “not up to the Russian government alone.” The public debate, Oreshkin points out, may be “suppressed and forced far below the surface,” but it has not disappeared, and neither has the conflict between the increasingly reactionary regime and the advanced part of the “nascent but growing” civil society, flexible and capable of innovative thinking, self-financing, and efficiency.

The spontaneous “social mobilization” of Russian civil society that preceded Putin’s patriotic mobilization, Makarenko reminds us, showed for first time since 1917 that a “mass social foundation” for a liberal political program had emerged in Russia. Far from being the outliers, the public protesters and their agenda were viewed
positively (or at least neutrally) by a plurality of Russians.

Dmitriev believes that the protests’ center of gravity has shifted from Moscow—where the demands for political change are spearheaded by an “active minority” inspired by modernization values—to the provinces, where a broader dissent is likely to be fueled by economic deterioration. Yet, the “real risks” to the regime will materialize when economically driven protests in the provinces “catalyze” and merge with the more politically oriented opposition in Moscow.

Finally, only time will tell, Malashenko argues, if and for how long the “lull” in the terrorist attacks outside the North Caucasus continues. It is unlikely that Russia will find itself lucky to be exempted from the pan-European trend of militant Islamism, exacerbated, as elsewhere in Europe, by ISIS. The annexation of Crimea and the systematic restriction of the religious, cultural, and political autonomy of the Muslim Crimean Tatars adds to this pressure.

***

When it comes to broader scenarios of the future, they range from the “back-to-the-USSR” outcome on one end of the probabilities continuum to a revolutionary upheaval on the other, with a “harder” authoritarianism or a return to the “modernization path” in between. Similarly, Gudkov deems nonviolent, gradual “evolution” far more likely than “revolution,” with “decay” as a prominent, if not central, element of any future scenario.

Contributing to this decay will be the decreasing accountability of regional elites. This perennial scourge of authoritarian regimes, which contributed mightily to the demise of the Soviet Union, is recorded and analyzed by Gontmakher. Yet even as local elites increasingly go into “business for themselves”—with the resultant corruption, distorted feedback, and erosion of the center’s control over provinces—Gontmakher does not believe that local elites are ready for “direct confrontation” with the center, since most of them rule regions dependent on federal transfers for existence. As to the central elites, they may be spurred into action only if they believe that Russia is headed for a systemic crisis. Such a U-turn in
loyalty to the regime must neither be overestimated nor “discounted completely.”

In the end, specific scenarios aside, an overarching prophecy seems to be this: although it is able to increase domestic repression, harass its neighbors, and heighten tensions with the West, the Putin regime finds itself at a loss when it comes to constructively and imaginatively confronting (much less reversing) structural threats of an economic, political, social, and religious nature. As the authors of these masterful chapters have shown, obscured today by the fog of war and induced patriotic frenzy, the structural problems are quite real and are only likely to grow wider and deeper, potentially morphing into multiple converging crises.
Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Danielle Pletka, who first suggested bringing together students of different aspects of Putin’s Russia. Katie Earle was indispensable in fleshing out a grant proposal, which was finalized by Lauren Kimaid and Laura Krafsur, part of AEI’s terrific grant team. As always, the Smith Richardson Foundation staff were encouraging and precise in making sure the proposal was as good as it could be. The comments and critiques of three anonymous reviewers helped make the project richer and more sustainable.

After Yuri Somov produced first drafts of translations, the indefatigable Katie did the yeoman’s work (some of it during her summer vacation) of editing all nine chapters and passed them on, hugely improved, to Joe Gates and me for the next round of edits. Most ably assisted by Dan Frey and Lisa McBrearty, Joe also chased down references; double checked a host of numbers in text, tables, and charts; and made accompanying notations more accessible.

Patiently and cheerfully, Christy Sadler and Hilary Waterman went through at least three drafts of each chapter, signaling substantive and stylistic imperfections to Joe and me and then sending much improved chapters back with more questions and comments.

Claude Aubert and Olivier Ballou were masterful in typesetting the text, rendering the original charts and tables in the right formats, and making a handsome book out of words on a screen. My thanks also go to Tim Frye, Mark Galeotti, and Dan Treisman, three of the most original and powerful Russia scholars in US academia today, for reading the typeset version.

Most of all, I am indebted to the nine authors for agreeing to write the essays that became this compilation. They have been invariably quick and graceful in responding to my endless requests for
clarifications, citations, and updates in both the Russian originals and their English incarnations.
About the Authors

Mikhail Dmitriev has served as president of New Economic Growth, a consulting firm in Russia, since 2014. Before assuming his current position, Dmitriev was president of the Moscow-based Center for Strategic Research from 2005 to 2014. He was first deputy minister of economic development and trade in the Russian government from 2000 to 2004, first deputy minister of labor and social development from 1997 to 1998, and a member of the Russian parliament from 1990 to 1993. He began work as a researcher at the Leningrad Finance and Economics Institute in 1983. In 1995–97 and in 1998–2000, he was scholar in residence at the Carnegie Moscow Center.

Evgeny Gontmakher is a management board member of the Institute of Contemporary Development and deputy director of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations. From 2006 to 2009, he was head of the Social Policy Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Economics. From 2003 to 2004, he was vice president of the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs after serving as head of the Social Development Department of the Cabinet Apparatus from 1998 to 2003. He was also previously a department head within the Administration of the Russian Government and deputy minister for social protection.

Lev Gudkov is the director of the prestigious research institute the Levada Center, a position he has held since 2006. Previously, he was the head of the center’s Department of Sociopolitical Research. He has also taught in the Department of Sociology at the National Research University–Higher School of Economics since 2009. He was the leading research associate in the Russian Public Opinion Research Center from 1988 to 1991 and was also head of the center’s
Department of Theory and later of the Department of Sociopolitical Research. In addition to research, Gudkov is the editor in chief of the Russian Public Opinion Herald. He has authored more than 70 books and articles on the problems of post-Communist society, transition, sociology of culture, and literature.

Sergei Guriev is a professor of economics at Sciences Po, Paris. From 2004 to 2013, he was a tenured professor of economics and rector of the New Economic School in Moscow. In 1997–98, Guriev visited the Department of Economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for a one-year postdoctoral placement, and in 2003–04, he worked in the Department of Economics at Princeton University as a visiting assistant professor. Guriev's research interests include contract theory, corporate governance, political economics, and labor mobility. He has published in international refereed journals such as American Economic Review, Journal of European Economic Association, Journal of Economic Perspectives, and American Political Science Review.

Boris Makarenko is chairman of the board of the Center for Political Technologies, a Moscow-based independent think tank. He is also a professor of comparative politics at the Moscow Higher School of Economics. From 2008 to 2012, he served as director for domestic policy at the Institute for Contemporary Development. His research interests include comparative political development, modernization, political parties, and political institutions. He is the author of two books on the Russian parliament and Russian political parties and numerous articles published in Russia, Europe, the United States, and China.

Alexey Malashenko is chair of the Carnegie Moscow Center’s Religion, Society, and Security Program. He also taught at the National Research University’s Higher School of Economics from 2007 to 2008 and was a professor at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations from 2000 to 2006. In the 1990s, he was the head of religious studies at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences.
Dmitry Oreshkin is a political scientist, journalist, and member of the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights. In 2007, he ran for deputy in the State Duma, representing the Union of Right Forces political party. From 1995 to 2007, he was invited to provide analysis for the State Duma and presidential elections. In 1993, he launched the Mercator analytical group with Aleksandr Skvortcov and Aleksandr Beliaev. From 1989 to 1990, he provided research support for international TV projects across the USSR for the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization and for the BBC (UK), ABC (US), and Asahi and NHK (Japan) channels.

Kirill Rogov is a senior research fellow at the Gaidar Institute for Economic Policy and the Academy for National Economy and Public Policy, member of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, and member of the supervisory board of the Liberal Mission Foundation (Moscow). Originally a specialist in Russian intellectual and cultural history of the 18th and 19th centuries, he started his journalism career in the late 1990s as cofounder and editor in chief of the news and opinions portal Polit.Ru, one of the first Russian online media websites. In the 2000s, he was a columnist at the leading business daily, Vedomosti, and later deputy editor in chief of Kommersant, another leading Russian newspaper. His most recent articles published in Russia and abroad are focused on current political developments and the post-Soviet history of Russia.

Natalia Zubarevich is a professor in the Department of Geography at Moscow State University and the director of the regional program at the Independent Institute for Social Policy, a prominent Moscow-based think tank. She is a specialist in the fields of socio-economic development of regions, human geography, and urban development. She has written, coauthored, or edited several monographs, including Russian Regions: Inequality, Crisis, Modernization (2010), Social Development of Russia’s Regions: Problems and Trends in Transition (2007, 2005, and 2003), and Russia’s Regions: What Is the Social Space We Live In? (2005).
**Board of Trustees**

Tully M. Friedman, *Chairman*
Chairman and CEO
Friedman Fleischer & Lowe, LLC

Daniel A. D’Aniello,
*Vice Chairman*
Chairman and Co-Founder
The Carlyle Group

Clifford S. Asness
Managing and Founding Principal
AQR Capital Management

Gordon M. Binder
Managing Director
Coastview Capital, LLC

Arthur C. Brooks
President and Beth and Ravenel Curry Chair in Free Enterprise
American Enterprise Institute

The Honorable
Richard B. Cheney
Peter H. Coors
Vice Chairman of the Board
Molson Coors Brewing Company

Harlan Crow
Chairman and CEO
Crow Holdings

Ravenel B. Curry III
Chief Investment Officer
Eagle Capital Management, LLC

John V. Faraci
Chairman
International Paper Company

Christopher B. Galvin
Chairman
Harrison Street Capital, LLC

Raymond V. Gilmartin
Chairman
Harvard Business School

Harvey Golub
Chairman and CEO, Retired
American Express Company

Robert F. Greenhill
Founder and Chairman
Greenhill & Co., Inc.

Frank J. Hanna
Hanna Capital, LLC

Seth A. Klaman
President and CEO
The Baupost Group, LLC

Bruce Kovner
Chairman
Caxton Alternative Management, LP

Marc S. Lipschultz
Partner
Kohlberg Kravis Roberts

Chairman and CEO
MeadWestvaco Corporation

George L. Priest
Yale Law School

Kevin B. Rollins
Senior Advisor
TPG Capital

Matthew K. Rose
Executive Chairman
BNSF Railway Company

Edward B. Rust Jr.
Chairman and CEO
State Farm Insurance Companies

**The American Enterprise Institute**

Founded in 1943, AEI is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research and educational organization based in Washington, DC. The Institute sponsors research, conducts seminars and conferences, and publishes books and periodicals.

AEI’s research is carried out under three major programs: Economic Policy Studies, Foreign and Defense Policy Studies, and Social and Political Studies. The resident scholars and fellows listed in these pages are part of a network that also includes adjunct scholars at leading universities throughout the United States and in several foreign countries.

The views expressed in AEI publications are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the staff, advisory panels, officers, or trustees.

D. Gideon Searle
Managing Partner
The Serafin Group, LLC

Mel Sembler
Founder and Chairman
The Sembler Company

Wilson H. Taylor
Chairman Emeritus
Cigna Corporation

William H. Walton
Managing Member
Rockpoint Group, LLC

Marilyn Ware
Chairman, Retired
American Water Works

**Emeritus Trustees**

Richard B. Madden
Robert H. Malott
Paul F. Orefice
Henry Wendt

**Officers**

Arthur C. Brooks
President and Beth and Ravenel Curry Chair in Free Enterprise

David Gerson
Executive Vice President

Jason Bertsch
Senior Vice President

Danielle Pletka
Senior Vice President, Foreign and Defense Policy Studies

Toby Stock
Vice President, Development and Academic Programs

**Council of Academic Advisers**

George L. Priest, *Chairman*
Edward J. Phelps Professor of Law and Economics
Yale Law School

Alan J. Auerbach
Robert D. Burch Professor of Economics and Law
University of California, Berkeley

Eliot A. Cohen
Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies
Johns Hopkins University

Eugene F. Fama
Robert R. McCormick Distinguished Service Professor of Finance
Booth School of Business
University of Chicago

Martin Feldstein
George F. Baker Professor of Economics
Harvard University

Aaron L. Friedberg
Professor of Politics and International Affairs
Princeton University

Robert P. George
McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence
Director, James Madison Program
in American Ideals and Institutions
Princeton University

Eric A. Hanushek
Paul and Jean Hanna Senior Fellow
Hoover Institution
Stanford University

R. Glenn Hubbard
Dean and Russell L. Carson Professor of Finance and Economics
Columbia Business School

Walter Russell Mead
James Clarke Chace Professor of Foreign Affairs and the Humanities
Bard College

John L. Palmer
University Professor and Dean Emeritus
Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs
Syracuse University

Mark Pauly
Bendheim Professor, Professor of Health Care Management
Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania

Sam Peltzman
Ralph and Dorothy Keller Distinguished Service Professor of Economics
Booth School of Business
University of Chicago

Jeremy A. Rabkin
Professor of Law
George Mason University

Richard J. Zeckhauser
Frank Plumptre Ramsey Professor of Political Economy
Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University
Research Staff

Joseph Antos
Wilson H. Taylor Scholar in Health Care and Retirement Policy; Resident Scholar

Leon Aron
Director, Russian Studies; Resident Scholar

Michael Auslin
Resident Scholar

Claude Barfield
Resident Scholar

Michael Barone
Resident Fellow

Roger Bate
Visiting Scholar

Richard Bennett
Visiting Fellow

Andrew G. Biggs
Resident Scholar

Edward Blum
Visiting Fellow

Dan Blumenthal
Director, Asian Studies; Resident Fellow

John R. Bolton
Senior Fellow

Karlyn Bowman
Research Coordinator; Senior Fellow

Alex Brill
Research Fellow

James C. Capretta
Visiting Fellow

Timothy P. Carney
Visiting Fellow

Lynne V. Cheney
Senior Fellow

Edward Conard
Visiting Scholar

Kevin Corinth
Research Fellow

Maura Corrigan
Visiting Fellow

Mike Daniels
Visiting Fellow

Sadanand Dhume
Resident Fellow

Robert Doar
Margriddle Fellow in Poverty Studies; Resident Fellow

Thomas Donnelly
Codirector, Marilyn Ware Center for Security Studies; Resident Fellow

Mackenzie Eaglen
Resident Fellow

Nicholas Eberstadt
Henry Wendt Scholar in Political Economy

Jeffrey Eisenach
Director, Center for Internet, Communications, and Technology Policy; Visiting Scholar

Jon Entine
Visiting Fellow

R. Richard Geddes
Visiting Scholar

James K. Glassman
Visiting Fellow

Jonah Goldberg
Fellow

Aspen Gorry
Visiting Scholar

Scott Gottlieb, MD
Resident Fellow

Phil Gramm
Visiting Scholar

Mary Habeck
Visiting Scholar

Kevin A. Hassett
Director, Economic Policy Studies; State Farm James Q. Wilson Chair in American Politics and Culture

Robert B. Helms
Resident Scholar

Frederick M. Hess
Director, Education Policy Studies; Resident Scholar

R. Glenn Hubbard
Visiting Scholar

William Inglee
Visiting Fellow

Kevin James
Research Fellow

Matthew H. Jensen
Managing Director, Open Source Policy Center

Frederick W. Kagan
Director, AEI Critical Threats Project; Christopher DeMuth Chair; Resident Scholar

Leon R. Kass, MD
Madden-Jewett Chair; Resident Scholar

Andrew P. Kelly
Director, Center on Education Reform; Jacobs Associate; Resident Scholar

Paul H. Kupiec
Resident Scholar

Jon Kyl
Visiting Fellow

Desmond Lachman
Resident Fellow

Adam Lerrick
Visiting Scholar

Philip Lohaus
Research Fellow

Aparna Mathur
Jacobs Associate; Resident Scholar

Michael Mazza
Jacobs Associate; Research Fellow

J. Matthew McInnis
Resident Fellow

Michael Q. McShane
Research Fellow

Thomas P. Miller
Resident Fellow

Charles Murray
W. H. Brady Scholar

Lindsey R. Neas
Research Fellow

Roger F. Noriega
Fellow

Stephen D. Oliner
Codirector, AEI’s International Center on Housing Finance; Resident Scholar

Norman J. Ornstein
Resident Scholar

Mark J. Perry
Scholar

James Pethokoukis
Editor, Alieads Blog; DeWitt Wallace Fellow

Thomas Philipson
Visiting Scholar

Edward J. Pinto
Codirector, AEI’s International Center on Housing Finance; Resident Fellow

Alex J. Pollock
Resident Fellow

Ramesh Ponnuru
Visiting Fellow

Angela Rachidi
Research Fellow

Dalibor Rohac
Research Fellow

Michael Rubin
Resident Scholar

Sally Satel, MD
Resident Scholar

Gary J. Schmitt
Codirector, Marilyn Ware Center for Security Studies; Director, Program on American Citizenship; Resident Scholar

Mark Schneider
Visiting Scholar

David Schoenbrod
Visiting Scholar

Derek M. Scissors
Resident Scholar

Sita Slavov
Visiting Scholar

Vincent H. Smith
Director, Agriculture Studies; Visiting Scholar

Christina Hoff Sommers
Resident Scholar

Katharine B. Stevens
Research Fellow

Thomas P. Stossel
Visiting Scholar

Michael R. Strain
Deputy Director, Economic Policy Studies; Resident Scholar

Phillip Swagel
Visiting Scholar

Jim Talent
Director, Marilyn Ware Center’s National Security 2020 Project; Senior Fellow

Shane Tews
Visiting Fellow

Marc A. Thiessen
Fellow

Stan A. Veuger
Resident Scholar

Alan D. Viard
Resident Scholar

Peter J. Wallison
Arthur F. Burns Fellow in American Politics and Culture; Resident Scholar

W. Bradford Wilcox
Visiting Scholar

Paul Woffowitz
Scholar

John Yoo
Visiting Scholar

Roger I. Zakheim
Visiting Fellow

Katherine Zimmerman
Research Fellow

Joel M. Zinberg, MD
Visiting Scholar

Benjamin Zycher
John G. Searle Chair; Resident Scholar
Leon Aron has gathered a supremely talented group of academics from Russia to help illuminate the many political, economic, and social dilemmas facing their country. Underlying all the essays are a sensitivity to political context on a wide range of topics that few works can match. Even seasoned Russia hands will learn much from this volume.

—Timothy Frye, Columbia University

It often takes an insider to appreciate the nuances of politics and society and to put them in context, and Leon Aron has assembled an all-star list of the best scholars in Russia to explore today’s trends and tomorrow’s possibilities.

—Mark Galeotti, New York University

With a star-studded roster of Russia experts, “Putin’s Russia: How it rose, how it is maintained, and how it might end” offers critical insights into the confusing realities of the Putin regime. At a time when Russian politics is at its most obscure and potentially dangerous, “Putin’s Russia” makes an invaluable contribution to Western understanding.

—Daniel Treisman, University of California, Los Angeles