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# The Russian political system in transition

## Scenarios for power transfer

Ekaterina Schulmann



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# Summary

In the aftermath of the March 2018 presidential elections, the Russian political system is preparing for – indeed, already entering – the next phase of its development: the transition of power. This inevitable, but still unmentionable, transition is the topic of topics in the minds of Russia’s political elites, and is made all the more pertinent by the fact that the acting members of the decision-making class cannot discuss it openly. What is the constitutional framework around this political situation? Is there indeed a problem of succession, or, more broadly, of stability in the transition of power? What lessons could be drawn from other political regimes that resemble the Russian system? What are the possible scenarios for the transition of power? What are the positive and negative sides, feasibility and possible consequences of these scenarios? These are the questions this working paper seeks to address.

# The Russian political system in transition: Scenarios for power transfer

## **Constitutional restrictions – and the Chinese example**

What is the problem of the transition or transfer of power in today's Russia? Is there a problem at all? According to the Russian Constitution, the same person may occupy the presidential position twice in a row, and no more. The essence of the trouble lies in these words: 'in a row'. Vladimir Putin, the current incumbent, held the presidency for two consecutive terms: from 1999 to 2004 and from 2004 to 2008. Then Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev became president, for one four-year term. During his presidency, changes were implemented to the Constitution, and term limits for the president were extended from four to six years. In 2012, Putin returned, again as president, serving a six-year term till 2018. In March 2018, elections were held, and Putin was re-elected for another six years. By law, he can continue until 2024 – but then, something will need to be done.

The simplest solution seems to be to change the Constitution. Russia's great neighbour China may provide a model. Many in the Russian political elite see China as an example of a country that has managed to preserve its integrity and sovereignty without the kind of breakup that hit the Soviet Union. This is not a new phenomenon: positive perceptions and appreciations of the 'Chinese way,' or 'Chinese scenario,' have been voiced in the Russian public sphere ever since the *perestroika* years. Since 2014, Russians have been hearing even more about it, as the view that Russia's worsening relations with the West necessitate a turn towards China as the preferred trade partner and political ally has gained traction. While leaving it to the economists to determine whether this is realistic and translatable into actual economic turnout and trade balance, we should keep in mind that, for the Russian political class, China is a kind of imaginary childhood pal who *must* be seen in opposition to the 'bad guy' – the 'West' and, specifically, the USA.

On 11 March 2018, China's National People's Congress (NPC) adopted an amendment to the Constitution, repealing the term limits for the President and Vice President. Previously, according to Article 79 of the Constitution, the President and Vice President could not serve more than

two consecutive five-year terms. Now this stipulation was removed. Actually, that was not the only constitutional change adopted by the NPC: it was part of a spate of lesser changes dealing with the exact terms of party leadership, supervisory organs, ecological norms and local self-government. However, both the method and the substance of this important amendment may serve as guidance to Russian decision-makers.

### **Classifications of political regimes**

Why is it important to a regime to keep one and same person in a position of power? How much does regime stability hinge on that person? One of the most interesting and fruitful developments in recent political science is the tendency to avoid a strict dichotomy between democracy and autocracy. The two used to be seen as opposing poles that had nothing in common with each other. Now, political scientists tend to recognize both autocratic and democratic elements as ever-present in the composition of any political system. What matters is the dynamic between those two elements.

According to the ‘iron law of oligarchy’, in any social group and in any country, power in organizations tends to concentrate in a small group of people. That is the *autocratic* tendency. The desire of people to be involved in making decisions of importance to their lives and to cooperate with each other is then the *democratic* tendency. Both are present in any society. It is the business of democratic institutions to support the democratic tendency and to try to prevent the autocratic tendency from power getting monopolized by a small group.

### **Russia as a personalist autocracy**

According to a political regime classification widely used academically and in the media, autocracies may be divided into three types: personalist autocracies, where power is vested in the leader and his/her nearest surroundings; party autocracies, systems where the ruling party keeps its position by training and rotating loyal elites within the structure of the party; and military autocracies, or juntas, where power is vested in the military and the police (Geddes et al. 2014).

Russia is usually classified as a personalist autocracy – this is the most widespread description, in academia, the media, and public opinion outside Russia. If we agree that Russia is a personalist autocracy, then we should note that, statistically, such regimes have problems with the transfer of power, for obvious reasons. Lacking developed, self-sustainable institutions, and with mechanisms of decision-making

dependent on personal relations and on *de facto* rather than *de jure* rules – customs rather than written regulations – these systems are ill-equipped to meet the natural law of generational change (Petrov et al. 2014). Statistically, personalist autocracies have an average lifespan of sixteen years. After that comes the transformation period. Further, political regime statistics show that personalist autocracies tend to be transformed not into democracies but into autocracies of other types, military ones in particular. These, in turn, have an average lifespan of five to seven years, after which they tend to hand over power to the winner of an election instead of reverting to a personalist autocracy.

While regime statistics are very useful for political scientists because they can present the big picture, they can be misleading for precisely the same reason. If one item in your calculation is an entire country, statistical error may become quite costly. If 99 countries of this type behave one way whereas your country behaves differently, it will be scant consolation to realize you are just 1%. That consideration should not deter us from using a tool which can be helpful, but we should also bear in mind that regime statistics are heavily influenced by the many smaller countries in Latin America and Northern and Central Africa that tend to have active transition dynamics.

### **Russian autocracy and its decision-making class**

If modern Russia is a personalist autocracy, what specificities differentiate it from other autocracies or hybrid regimes? Russia does have democratic institutions and democratic mechanisms enshrined in its Constitution. Constitutional amendments implemented since 1993, if we leave out those that concern territorial structure and regional changes, have not materially affected this democratic framework. The most significant changes to date were adopted in 2008, extending the presidential term of office from four to six years, and that of the State Duma from four to five years. Amendments of February 2014 merged the Russian Superior Court of Arbitration with the Supreme Court and gave the president additional powers in the appointment of prosecutors.

By contrast, federal legislation has changed greatly, especially since 2012, in terms of tightening regulations in the sphere of public law. Legislation concerning political freedoms, elections, political parties, the media, NGOs, and public protests and rallies has been considerably amended, with the aim of ensuring stricter control over the public sphere and imposing a higher price on any protest activity (Human Rights Watch 2018). This was a direct reaction to the mass protests of 2011–2012, and was completed by the newly-elected Duma in the first two years of its tenure, by early 2014 (Brechenmacher 2017).



The question, however, is not whether Russia is a full liberal democracy, but whether the power is indeed vested in the person of the leader. What we do know about Russia as a political model, as a decision-making machine, is that it is extremely bureaucratized. There is a proverbial saying of the Russian Tsar Nicholas I: ‘It is not I who rule Russia. It is forty thousand *stolonachalniki* (clerks)’. Since then, these forty thousand have multiplied to almost two million (if we count civil servants only), and the saying still holds true.

A study by the Higher School of Economics in Moscow found that 2.5% of federal budget expenditure is spent on public administration, and about 40% of all budgetary resources are controlled by the ruling elites (Feinberg 2017). This extensive and well-fed bureaucracy seeks to regulate all aspects of the economy, public life, and political activity. In practice, this means that at any given moment many decisions will have to be made, and they cannot all be made by a small group of people. In other words, such a large and complicated system as that of the Russian Federation today cannot be ruled by one person and his close circle of friends alone. The usual answer to this charge is that these elites make the *most important decisions*, sending signals to the lower tiers of the pyramid. In a sense, this is the mechanism of ruling anywhere. However, in recent years, observers of the Russian decision-making mechanism have seen changes in the ‘power vertical’, which even at the best of times was more a propaganda image than reality (Treisman 2018).

The Russian decision-making class is mostly bureaucratic, made up of people directly or indirectly connected to the state. There is the bureaucracy per se: civil servants at the federal, regional, and local levels. There is the coercive bureaucracy: the police, the secret services, and the law enforcement services. There is the army and the military-industrial complex, into which great budgetary investments have been poured over the past ten years. Although Russian military spending peaked in 2016, the downward trend in 2017 and 2018 and plans for reduced military spending in budgetary projections for the next three years will still not bring expenditures below the 2014 level.

Then there is the economic bureaucracy: the state corporations, state banks, and the state oligarchs, who will be the main beneficiaries of what is referred to as ‘the new presidential May decree’ – a large-scale programme for infrastructure spending outlined in a decree issued by President Putin following his re-election in 2018. It entails massive budgetary spending for infrastructure projects: roads, airports, bridges, rubbish incineration facilities, etc., and state oligarchs will be the

recipients of state contracts (Kremlin.ru 2018). Finally, there is the media bureaucracy: the propaganda machine, state television, and the massive but hidden system of influencing the information field in the Internet, via the social media in particular.

### **Public attitudes and the power vertical**

The Russian power vertical was influenced by the economic crisis, which, in the form of economic stagnation, started even before 2014. The slow-down, and from 2014 almost zero economic growth, led to a highly tangible economic result: a downward trend in real disposable incomes. Russia is frequently perceived as a land of poor people – but, for public opinion within the country, what matters is not so much the objective level of wealth, as the tendency. Russians' real disposable incomes started at a tragically low level, and are still low. Russia is predominantly a country of low-paid employees. However, before the decline set in, the public had experienced an upward trend for 15 years. Oil prices (and general prices of the resources Russia depends on for exports) have fluctuated greatly – sometime falling, sometimes stagnating. Politically, that means that the system, built on resource accumulation and resource distribution (first among the elites and then, by diffusion, among the people), is facing a shrinking resource base and, consequently, more intense internal competition.

Further, public opinion was bound to change. A certain sense that the country was moving generally in the right direction and that the lives of the citizenry were getting better characterized public opinion for many years after the turn of the millennium. Since 2011, however, public discontent has grown, as evidenced by the mass protests of 2011–2012. This had no direct connection with the economy: it was more the discontent of the urban classes, who considered themselves sufficiently adult and well-fed to allow themselves to remember that they also had certain political rights. In 2014, Russia's perceived external victories produced a wave of euphoria. As regards public opinion, this euphoria was at its highest during the May festivities of 2014. Then came autumn, with the falling rouble, higher prices, and food import sanctions, all perceived by public opinion as being imposed by the West, rather than the other way around.

The general process underway in the Russian public consciousness today has various names among sociologists and other social scientists. Some call it the demise of paternalistic consciousness; others, the death of legalistic utopia. What these social scientists are trying to say, it seems, is that in the minds of the average Russian, there is a change in how the roles of the state and of the citizen are understood. There are

fewer expectations of state help and state patronage, as well as some disappointment at the role of the state as 'parent'.

This change does not immediately take the form of any rise in civil self-respect. It is rather a feeling of disappointment and depression. Fewer people believe that a firm hand or strongman leader is what Russia needs; more and more people are saying that the state should be 'just'. 'Justice' has replaced 'strength' in the public mind. This is *spravedlivost*, a complicated umbrella term covering a wide range of subjects. This 'justice' sometimes means 'law', and sometimes 'mercy'. It may mean revenge, and it may mean equality. Nonetheless, this term is useful for explaining the changes in public opinion, and might be the keyword to future political changes (Belanovskii et al. 2018).

One more important thing happened in mid-2017: the normalization of protests. Now polls revealed that, collectively, more than 50% of the respondents held that protest activity was normal and should not be suppressed by the state. This meant that the threat of a new Maidan, of catastrophic upheavals stemming from oppositional activity, which had been one of the chief tools of the Russian state propaganda, was gradually losing potency. That is not to say that Russians are particularly eager for a revolution or for violent regime change: the same polls and surveys show low levels of aggression among all demographic strata, and moderately low tolerance as regards violence, especially state violence. However, Russians are increasingly seeing protests not as a threat to public safety, but as a normal political activity.

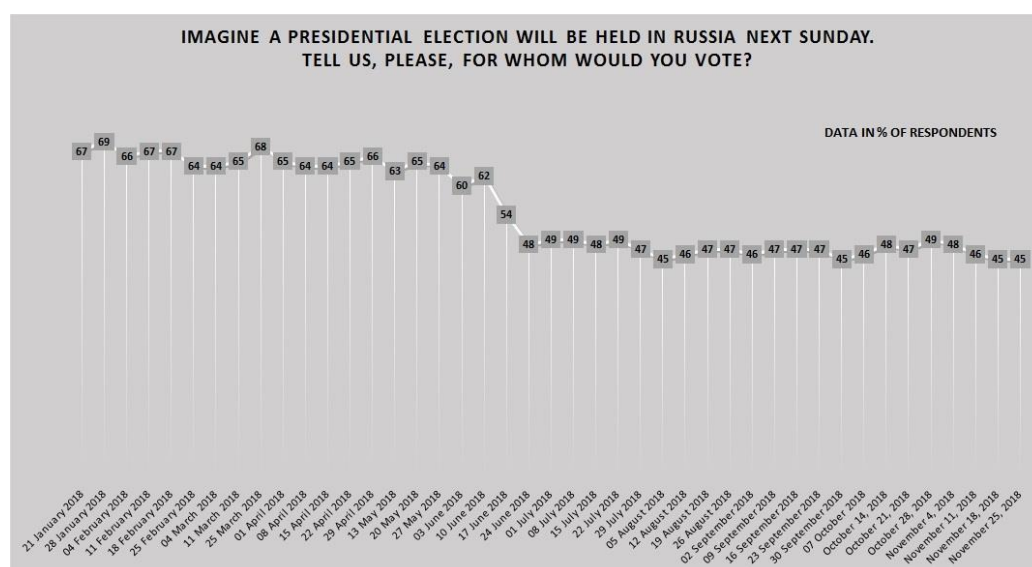
### **Public opinion on political officials and institutions**

In 2018, the now-famous reform of the retirement age was announced, followed by drastic changes in the personal ratings of the President, the United Russia party, and other political institutions like the government and parliament. Regional and local authorities were less affected – but they were quite unpopular in the first place. The new retirement age reform is presented as affecting these ratings. In fact, it has served more as a catalyst of changes in public opinion underway long before the reform was announced (Volkov 2018).

Since 2014, presidential approval ratings have been disconnected from other sociological markers like approval/disapproval for other political institutions or leaders. One hears of the 'symbolic' or 'sacred' value of the presidential rating. In practice, this has meant that any correlation between a interviewee's approval of the President and his/her opinions on other subjects has disappeared.

Starting from 2018, there has been not only a downward trend in presidential approval ratings, but the return of the above-mentioned correlation. Three political figures have been following each other in terms of rating dynamics: The President, the Minister of Defence and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Together they symbolize Russian foreign policy, which for the last four years had been best asset of state power in Russia. Since the summer of 2018, they have gone down together. This means a change in attitude not only towards individual personalities, but towards the agenda itself. Foreign policy, once an asset, has become more of a liability (Levada 2018).

Figure 1. Percentage of respondents who would vote for the incumbent if there were a presidential election next Sunday (FOM)



## Presidential functions and transfer of power

What do these changes portend for the future transfer of power in Russia? In order to understand whether there is a problem or not, we need to assess the role of the president in the political system. What does he do for the collective elites – the bureaucracy and interest groups – that constitute the Russian ruling class? To put it bluntly, what do they need him for? The president plays three important roles, in which no one could yet replace him.

First, the President provides external legitimacy. He represents the Russian political regime outside Russia. There has long been a perception among the elites that the President, with his knowledge, authority and many years of experience, protects their interests abroad, shields them from possible threats, and therefore supplies external legitimacy for the ruling class generally, and, by extension, for the Russian state.

Second, there is the internal legitimacy function. The President has been highly popular, and even with the declining ratings he is still by far the most trusted and respected public figure in Russia. He wins elections and delegates his legitimacy to the United Russia party, to the governors, and to all the lesser bureaucrats. The decision-makers and influencers of the power machine are either unknown to the general public or, if known, are generally distrusted and disliked. The President provides the magic potion of public approval that can make the system run smoothly. This is the internal legitimacy function.

Third, and directly related directly to the workings of the system, is the preservation of its internal balance, the equilibrium of forces. A shrinking resource base leads to higher competition. Intense internal wars between power clans and interest groups, most of them within (or at least involving the participation of) the secret service and law enforcement community, form much of the substance of Russian internal politics. The role of the President is to preserve the precarious balance between those competing parties. In practice, this preservation of the equilibrium means that no group should win a conflict involving all other groups and emerge as number one, nor should only two groups defeat all others and stand against each other. Knowing this principle, we can see why the Federal Security Service (FSB) and Federal Protection Service (FSO) are unlikely to be merged into one Ministry of State Security, or why the Investigative Committee will probably remain in place and not be re-absorbed into the Office of the Prosecutor General. More groups, not fewer, are needed to preserve the balance. With the FSB the strongest among the security bodies, internal competition among various FSB departments is encouraged, to prevent it from monopolizing the power field.

### **Problems with presidential functions**

The performance of all the three functions has generally been efficient. Recently, however, some problems have arisen. In terms of *external legitimacy*, and without exaggerating the influence of the sanctions on internal political stability, the sanctions regime has not been eased in any respect. How much does this trouble the elites? It is certain that, for

any member of the system, the advantages of belonging to the system far outweigh any damage that the external world can inflict. The state has much to offer those who are loyal, and any losses they sustain can be more than compensated. Be that as it may, the situation has clearly deteriorated. Personal meetings and public declarations have apparently failed to achieve any tangible effects, and Russian interests and Russian assets abroad increasingly feel themselves threatened.

In terms of *internal legitimacy*, the presidential elections have been very successful – from the perspective of the system. In the 2018 elections, turnout was 67% and the incumbent received 76% of the vote. However, the changes in public opinion described above, including the conspicuous drop in ratings, have already manifested themselves in persistent protest voting in the regional election campaigns of the autumn/ winter of 2018. This is taken as an ominous sign by members and beneficiaries of the political system, who, in the absence of imminent federal-level elections, attach disproportionate importance to the sanctity of the presidential rating. To put it simply, a less popular president may have less freedom in naming his successor – if he plans to have any.

In terms of preserving the balance, the balance is still there. This is what political scientists now are watching with great attention. If one group should emerge and defeat all the others, that would mean that the nature of the system is changing. So far, we have seen only under-the-carpet rug wars: the basic principles of the system have remained intact (Rogov 2018).

### **Conclusion: Scenarios for 2024**

The possible scenarios for 2024, or rather pre-2024 scenarios, are not unlimited in number.

There is the simplest and most practical ‘Chinese option’: to amend the Russian Constitution and delete the ‘two consecutive terms’ provision. One obstacle to that would be the specific legalism of the system, which tends to preserve the constitutional framework. This is quite typical: political regimes resembling that of Russia tend to go to great lengths to preserve the appearance of legality (Engelhart 2014). If there had been no problem with changing the Constitution, the desired change could have been effected years ago: for example, at the same time as the presidential term was extended in 2008. The system prizes stability and has qualms about fiddling about with the constitutional framework.

Another possible obstacle is that, by the early 2020s, natural generational change and the ongoing transformation of public opinion will make society more averse to the idea of indefinite presidential rule. Around 2021, members of the sizeable generations born in the early years of the new millennium will become more actively involved in public life. Russia had exactly ten years of comparatively high birth rates: from 2004 to 2014. When these young people become students, workers, and voters, it will affect the political climate. Moreover, the generation currently occupying the upper tiers of the administrative pyramid was born in the 1950s. In 2017, the median age of members of the Russian Security Council was 60.4. By 2021, many of Russia's top executives will be nearing 70.

A second possible scenario is to choose a successor: a repetition of the 2008 switch between Putin and Medvedev, or perhaps the 1999 power change, when Yeltsin handed the presidency over to Putin. The problem here is that, sometime around 2020, the system's collective mind will begin to recognize the near-impossibility of transferring the power that was vested in the current president to any single individual. The various interest groups will have difficulties agreeing on a successor figure who could realistically inherit the role and perform the functions of the current president. This will lead the system to consider dividing those functions and responsibilities, through legislative reform. Some discussion along these lines has evidently begun to emerge within the power system, as shown by an article by the Chairman of the Constitutional Court in the government's official newspaper, *Rossiiskaya gazeta* (Zorkin 2018): This article simultaneously defends constitutional stability against unnamed forces who allegedly seek to amend it, and advocates a wide range of changes – from creating a more fair balance between the legislative and the executive and between the federal and the regional powers, to including the system of local self-government within the system of state power (which would in fact necessitate a change in Chapter I of the Constitution, which cannot be amended except by convocating a Constitutional Assembly).

The most natural direction for constitutional changes of this kind would be the creation of new, or the empowerment of existing, collective bodies. It might involve renovating the State Council, now a largely dormant advisory body with ceremonial functions, consisting of the regional heads of executive power and higher officials of the government, the presidential administration, and the Federal Assembly. It might entail further empowerment of the Security Council, an extremely influential body, composed of key power ministers and agency heads and chaired by the President. Some additional powers could be transferred to the Parliament, or its existing but dormant

functions could simply be revived – like parliamentary control over the government or over the budgetary process (the latter has been given a boost by the appointment of one of Russia’s most experienced and influential bureaucrats, former Minister of Finance Aleksei Kudrin, chairman of the Accounts Chamber).

A rather risky variation of the scenario of empowering collective bodies could be a movement towards the Union State of Russia and Belarus, which is now a vague political arrangement. Reframing the Union, and the election of a Union President, would speak to the older generation’s penchant for anything that resembles the ‘restoration of the Soviet Union’, and would circumvent the ‘two consecutive terms’ problem by turning over a whole new leaf. Moreover, with Belarus not being a NATO member, any encroachments on its sovereignty would hardly move the West to the defence of ‘Europe’s last dictator’. Of course, there is a very tangible obstacle in the form of the current state of Belarus and its ruling elites, and the degree of nostalgia for the Soviet era among the Russian public tends to be greatly exaggerated by observers – but it still makes sense to keep an eye on Belarusian–Russian policy in this sphere.

In his recent paper ‘Democracy by Mistake’, political scientist Daniel Treisman finds that in about two thirds of all cases of political regime democratization since 1800, democratization occurred not because incumbent elites chose it but because, in trying to prevent it, they made mistakes that weakened their hold on power (Treisman 2017). Common mistakes have included calling elections or starting military conflicts, only to lose them; ignoring popular unrest and being overthrown; initiating limited reforms that get out of hand; and selecting a covert democrat as leader. A system bent on survival may undermine its own stability in searching for a fool-proof recipe for eternal life. While the simplest solution would seem to be to just letting things continue as they are, the system cannot live in a state of uncertainty until 2024. By 2020, before the next parliamentary election campaign in Russia, decision-makers and the ruling bureaucracy must have developed some understanding as to what will happen next. That being said, delineating scenarios is not the same as implementing them – and, once implemented, even the best plans tend to have unforeseen consequences.



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