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Putin's Ancien Régime

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Contents

Summary	4
Putin’s Ancien Régime	6
Big Ambitions, Small Economy.....	6
Limited Modernization	6
Modern Means, Age-old Ends	7
Domestic Politics as the “Home front”	8
Bibliography	10

Summary

After 20 years with Vladimir Putin in power, Putin's Russia is becoming an *ancien régime*. The gap between Russia's aspirations for a significant global role, and its ability and capacity to sustain such a role (always a challenge for Russia's rulers), is now growing. Putin has not learned from history and from his predecessors. Russia continues to try to punch above its weight, with attempts to destabilize by creating new geopolitical "realities," as in the case of Crimea. At home, the population is dissatisfied, and the regime is under pressure to come up with new solutions to old problems.

Putin's Ancien Régime

Big Ambitions, Small Economy

Russian leaders have often found themselves in a situation in which the leader's sense of entitlement to a great mission conflicted with the country's level of economic development. The Russian-born American economic historian Alexander Gerschenkron has argued,

Russia's involvement [in military conflicts with the West] revealed a curious internal conflict between the tasks of the Russian government that were "modern" in the contemporaneous sense of the word and the hopelessly backward economy of the country on which the military policies had to be based (Gerschenkron 1966: 17).

Although the terminology used by Gerschenkron is now outdated, the general idea of a gap between Russia's desired role in history and Russia's real ability still stands. Most Russian leaders have seen bridging this gap as their main mission. Because they viewed their country as a great power, they felt compelled to do something to catch up with, even overtake, other great powers. However, they always lacked the resources to do so. Time and again, economic and developmental breakthrough was a plan that remained half-fulfilled. That is why Russia's leaders have ended up trying to punch above their weight. Their vision would always include battling for prominence against the background of perceived hostility toward Russia on the part of all the other big international players.

Limited Modernization

Vladimir Putin is a "normal" Russian leader in the sense that he realized early on that his mission, like that of many of his predecessors, was to close the gap between the advanced and hostile West and the ascendant Russia of his dreams. To ensure that Russia was accepted as an equal at the table with the world's preeminent nations, Putin set about restoring and modernizing its armed forces. As in most other historical instances of modernization drives (including that of Stalin), these attempts became highly selective and technical, focused largely on the military and on weapons exports. Since 2008 Russia has undergone several

transformative military reforms and modernization programs. The US security analyst Michael Kofman argues:

Russia's military reform and modernization on the whole have been successful in restoring the armed forces as a useful instrument of national power. Arguably the only Russian institution that has been successfully reformed in recent years and come out the better for it has been the military (quoted in Trudolyubov 2019).

Modern Means, Age-old Ends

Despite these efforts at modernizing, the disparity between Russia's and NATO's military capabilities is still enormous. This gap makes it strategically important for the Kremlin to keep everyone guessing whether Russia will strike again—and, if it strikes, exactly where. If this kind of projection is meant to compensate for the military disparities between Russia and NATO, it probably serves its purpose, as Putin has learnt from his predecessors. According to a report published by the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russia is

even taking pride in a decision-making process as inscrutable and unpredictable as possible. The ability to make strategic decisions quickly and to implement them militarily and politically with great speed and agility sets Russia apart from the tsarist Empire or the USSR (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland 2016: 13).

Russia creates a geopolitical reality and then works, often unsuccessfully, to get it recognized by everyone else. Such “facts” on the ground created by Russia over nearly 30 years of post-Soviet history include a part of Moldova (Transnistria), parts of Georgia (Abkhazia, South Ossetia), and parts of Ukraine (Crimea, and parts of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts). One of these territories was annexed, some function as breakaway states, some claim sovereignty—but all are assisted and backed by Russia. Crimea is, of course officially and according to international law, a part of Ukraine. But Russia has it that Crimea is Russian. For Russia, that is a fact on the ground: for the rest of the world, it is not. Russia wants to maintain a de facto reality which does not go well with the *de jure* situation. This is just one example of how Russia creates a geopolitical reality and then tries to get it fixed and recognized by everyone else.

It is not just on the ground that the Kremlin creates its “facts.” We should note the various events or pieces of information that Russia presents as

one thing and the rest of the world sees as another. These include election interference, criminal acts, and disinformation—all of which the Kremlin denies. The Kremlin is constantly playing with these two realities, the *de facto* and the *de jure*. It lacks the resources to make everyone acknowledge the realities it has created on the ground or believe its “truths,” but it does have enough resources to provoke, and dare to create more of those unrecognized “realities.”

Domestic Politics as the “Home front”

The Kremlin has not officially claimed that Russia is “at war,” but it does say the country is rife with foreign agents. The Russian people must rally together and identify the foreign agents in their midst, it is argued. The front lines in this battle may be fuzzy, but a strong home front is nonetheless needed. In times of peace, the argument goes, no one would resort to such measures. But today, with the harsh reality of war upon us, vigilance is needed, says the Kremlin. Therefore, elections will be little more than a formality. How can there be political competition when the country is under siege? If this or that candidate is barred from running in an election, well, he or she must have been aiding the enemy. No one really believes that elections in Russia involve true freedom of choice—but with the enemy at the gates, this semblance of democracy is all that society can muster.

However, there are signs of public discontent with Russia’s political establishment: in the 2018 regional elections, citizens of several regions refused to vote in accordance with the Kremlin’s well-known rules, and the Kremlin is uneasy. Putin has been engaged in suppressing institutions, not in order to break down something outdated, but in order to combat enemies and to erect something on the ruins of the Soviet institutions and unfinished post-Soviet constructions. Putin and his team have striven to take full advantage of the strong executive power laid down in Boris Yeltsin’s constitution.

However, there is a historical lesson: the bigger the state, the less governable. This has been an iron law in Russia's own history. The Soviet Union collapsed essentially because it had become ungovernable. It simply became just too cumbersome, and ran out of cash. Russia is becoming increasingly dependent on its oil and gas revenues, making it difficult to run a state like this. After twenty years of power, the office of

the president can hardly offer anything promising and new—unless a new wave of “turbo acceleration” is launched by a foreign escapade, or an aggressive domestic campaign is proclaimed.

Encumbered by this kind of luggage, Russia is finding it difficult to perform as an agile revisionist power. Countless novice populists and nationalists once looked up to Putin. Today, they see a far more convincing example in Washington. Trump has been more active than Putin in his attempts to crack down on the liberal press, cut off the oxygen supply to NGOs “financed by Soros”, protect the country against invasions of outsiders and enemies, construct walls, and bring nationalism as an ideology into the mainstream.

The Russian authorities’ reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the trends described above. The selective post-Soviet modernization implemented by the Kremlin focused mainly on the military and on weapons exports, leaving the country’s healthcare system unprepared for the unprecedented stresses of the current situation. Moreover, Russia’s dependence on oil and gas revenues has only deepened under Putin, making it vulnerable to the 2020 commodities price shock. With the COVID-19 pandemic, tensions between Moscow and the regions have intensified, as the Kremlin has been reluctant to take the lead in quarantine policymaking. Unwilling to be associated with “negative” decisions, President Putin has left it to the regional authorities to make their own decisions on self-isolation regimes and support to failing businesses—but most of Russia’s far-flung regions lack the necessary resources. Given Russia’s normally hyper-centralized decision-making processes, today’s spontaneous “federalization” is indeed unusual.

Putin has now had more years in power than Brezhnev, whose rule lasted 18 years. The longest rule in the 20th century was that of Stalin, roughly 25 years from the late 1920s to 1953. When Putin’s current term finishes in 2024, he will have been in power for exactly 25 years. In the Russian context, Putin’s regime is rapidly becoming an *ancien régime*. Sooner or later, it will have to confront the next wave of Russian political history.

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