

THE BURDEN OF PREDICTABILITY: RUSSIA'S 2018 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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In the absence of a real political contest, Russia's 2018 presidential election will be more or less a referendum on public confidence in Putin.

Ordinary and elite Russians alike are waiting for the country's March 2018 presidential elections with emotions ranging from apathy to a desire for change. There is, of course, precious little suspense about the ultimate outcome. According to the country's constitution, Russian President Vladimir Putin can serve another six-year term that will run until 2024, when he will turn seventy-two years old. This is expected to be an election in which little changes, least of all the name of the victor. Yet the mere beginning of a new political cycle—which in Russia coincides with each presidential election and not with the less consequential parliamentary elections that were last held in September 2016—raises questions about whether much-needed change will occur and, if so, what kind.

President Putin and his inner circle appear to be very content with the system they have constructed and see no reason to change it. They believe they have climbed to the summit of a mountain and have nothing to fear. Or, as one Russian political analyst confidentially described the thinking in the Kremlin, "Perfection has no future tense."¹ By this logic, it may be possible to tackle some of the flaws in the Putin system, provided that experts offer rational analysis that does not threaten the foundations of the regime. Technocratic tweaks or improvements are always welcome.

But there is no interest in reforms for the sake of liberalization. That would require the regime to grant society greater freedom, which is precisely what Russia's brand of hybrid autocracy cannot accept. After all, the regime believes that the biggest threats to its survival are not stagnation or inertia, but fundamental changes and adjustments to the system itself. As the Kremlin's thinking goes, if the model of populist authoritarianism is delivering, why alter it? To understand this mentality, it is useful to cite the principle offered by Tancredi Falconeri in the famous Sicilian novel *The Leopard*,² which does not apply to present-day Russia's ruling class: "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." Contrary to this observation, Russia's current rulers see a fundamental lack of change and even an absence of any major activity as being not a risk but an advantage of their system.

SENTRY CAPITALISM

The Kremlin's current ruling class is quietly working hard to ensure a smooth continuation of power in 2018. It is already making plans for the post-election political order, as evidenced by a series of recent high-level appointments and dismissals, all of which have been designed to provide even greater protection for President Putin. The Kremlin's significant personnel moves in 2016 offer clues as to how it seeks to ensure that the regime is perpetuated. Alexei Dyumin, Dmitry Mironov, and

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Yevgeny Zinichev were made governors of the regions of Tula, Yaroslavl, and Kaliningrad, respectively.³ All three came from the Presidential Security Service (FSO)⁴—one of the myriad Russian security services that jockey for power—which has greater responsibilities than its U.S. analogue, the Secret Service.

Meanwhile, former Kremlin chief of protocol Anton Vaino was made head of the presidential administration, and Sergei Kiriyenko—formerly prime minister under Boris Yeltsin and then chief of the state nuclear energy corporation Rosatom—became first deputy chief of staff of the presidential administration responsible for political issues. Kiriyenko replaced Vyacheslav Volodin, who became speaker of the State Duma. In addition, former minister of finance Alexei Kudrin was given *carte blanche* to develop a long-term road map for major economic, social, and administrative changes after 2018—if not a genuine program of reforms. The thirty-five-year-old technocrat Maxim Oreshkin was appointed minister of economic development.

A series of arrests or dismissals of top-level figures also has sent a strong political message. The liberal Kirov region governor, Nikita Belykh, was arrested, as were several other governors and senior managers of major companies. Federal Customs Service (FTS) chief Andrey Belyaninov and the longtime head of the presidential administration, Sergei Ivanov, were dismissed, too. The most significant event of all was the sacking and arrest on corruption charges of former minister of economic development Alexei Ulyukayev.

These recent personnel changes allow observers to draw several conclusions. First, the president has decided to rely less on his cronies and more on technocrats and security service veterans mainly in their forties or fifties from outside his inner circle. He likely expects this will increase administrative efficiency and reduce conspicuous corruption. The composition of Putin's inner circle is changing, and his most trusted subordinates are now predominantly individuals who do not speak to the president on a peer-to-peer basis or disagree with his judgments.

Essentially, Putin is grooming a new crop of appointees who have already started competing with each other for top positions⁵ in the system that will be formed after the 2018 elections. Specifically, the Russian president is testing the abilities of new appointees who might be contenders for the position of prime

minister. At the same time, the influence of Putin's old ally and chief of the oil company Rosneft, Igor Sechin, has visibly grown. Many saw his hand in the recent spate of arrests and dismissals, and received the clear message that he enjoys more license to act than any other member of Putin's inner circle. There is speculation that Moscow is witnessing the emergence of a Putin-Sechin duumvirate, which—if true—supports the theory that Putin most trusts the loyalists who protect him most closely. In other words, the regime is shifting from a model of crony capitalism to one of sentry capitalism, in which the head of state relies on his protectors.

A second conclusion about the current ruling regime is that, despite its continuing corruption and nepotism, Putin has decreed that the elites need to tone down their display of wealth and excessive corruption. If for no other reason, this is being emphasized so as not to irritate the general public and discredit the president at a time of economic crisis. Putin is wary of undue populism in the fight against corruption. He was unhappy that the searches of the home and office of former FTS chief Andrey Belyaninov⁶ were so public, and that the media got a hold of images of the astoundingly gaudy décor in the mansion of a man who had previously belonged to Putin's inner circle.⁷ For the president, it is sufficient to use the arrests to send the elites a clear message: no one—not even governors or ministers—is fully protected, and everyone must know the limits. Elites are being told not to act in a provocative manner on the eve of a presidential election.

Third, it is hoped in liberal circles that Kudrin will be able to articulate and implement reforms within a framework of authoritarian modernization. However, past attempts at such reforms—including then economic minister German Gref's program in 2000, then president Dmitry Medvedev's program from 2008 to 2012, and the more recent Strategy 2020 proposal—either failed to be enacted or were implemented in ways that achieved the opposite of what was intended. The problem is that Russia is not a country like Singapore: the Russian version of authoritarianism leaves no room for modernization.

Finally, there is the practical issue of ensuring that Putin gets high voter turnout and a landslide victory in 2018, in spite of the fact that the election itself will offer no real competition or element of excitement. As the existence of an external antagonist is useful for mobilizing support, the foreign enemy of the 2018 presidential campaign may end up being the collective West or

even the Donald Trump–led United States, following the air strikes in Syria. On the domestic front, Russia’s ruling elite will want to minimize the chance of any electoral surprises, so they will pummel opposition leader Alexey Navalny and prevent him from taking part in the election. There is no room for even small risks, and it would be a mistake, on their part, to raise Navalny’s national visibility by allowing him to run.

WHY PUTIN IS STILL POPULAR

Still, the current regime seeks popular legitimacy and not just elite support. Putin is more than a man. He has become as much a brand as Armani or Gucci—in his case, a brand synonymous with Russia and the seizure of Crimea. In Russian public opinion polls, the question of whether one approves of Putin’s performance is intuitively understood by respondents to be gauging whether one approves of Mother Russia herself. Why, then, should anyone be surprised by Putin’s sky-high 80 percent approval rating?⁸

In the language of traditional political science, Putin’s regime can be labelled a form of distilled or hybrid authoritarianism.⁹ But it cannot be called modern, having evolved from a system of state socialism to state capitalism without losing its emphasis on the state. It can be defined as a commercialized Soviet regime that has replaced Marxism-Leninism with an eclectic ideology centered on the idea of resurgent great-power status.

The public’s perception of its leader is not modern either. Already in 2007, attempts were being made to bestow the extraconstitutional title “national leader”¹⁰ on Putin. As it became apparent that Medvedev would become president in 2008, then speaker of the State Duma Boris Gryzlov came up with the concept and declared, “Every possible action will be taken to make sure that Vladimir Putin continues to rule the country.” Both Russia’s political establishment and a large part of the general population see Putin as a czar, or as akin to being the general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, a position that was close to being a czar in the Russian collective consciousness.

To properly understand modern-day Russian ideologists like Volodin—who coined the memorable phrase: “Putin is Russia, and Russia is Putin, and thus those who oppose Putin oppose Russia”¹¹—it is helpful to look back to medieval Europe, where political power was highly sacralized. The public’s perception

of the leader’s place in the state hierarchy is summed up by the medieval doctrine of the “two bodies of the king.”¹² This doctrine contends that the king consists of two bodies, a physical one and the body politic, the latter being a manifestation of state power. When Kremlin loyalists such as Soviet-era crooner Iosif Kobzon say things like “Putin is married to Russia,”¹³ they perhaps unwittingly are repeating a concept from this medieval political theology. In the words of historian Ernst Kantorowicz, “The Prince joined to himself as his *sponsa* the state.”¹⁴

Building from this, *rex est populus*¹⁵—meaning that the king is the people, is another medieval principle that is also useful for understanding modern Russia. It asserts that the king symbolically embodies the will of the people, and that even if a king dies or is otherwise replaced by a new monarch, the body politic of the king is preserved because it is indestructible. Perhaps the 80 percent or more of Russians who approve of Putin’s performance simply recognize that Russia and the king’s body politic are one and the same.

THE LIMITS OF THE RUSSIAN STATE

But an important lesson is that although the power that the Russian president holds is often characterized as authoritarian and personalist,¹⁶ it is above all symbolic. Public attitudes toward Russia’s ruling elite as a whole are less enthusiastic. On the one hand, respondents to a November 2016 Levada Center poll¹⁷ described the ruling authorities as being “strong and stable,” and in recent years the public has regarded the government as being less corrupt and crime-ridden than before. On the other hand, as table 1 indicates, Russians still feel that officials generally do not care about ordinary people and only look after their own interests.

Russia has become a kind of fictitious state—that is, a country built more on symbols and appearances than on durable, well-rounded capabilities.¹⁸ It is ostensibly quite powerful. After all, the Putin regime bombs Syria and has seized Palmyra and Aleppo. It makes bold pronouncements in the language of defense, warfare, and hatred. It puts the Orthodox Church, the armed forces, and the FSB front and center. Every day, the Kremlin proclaims its imperial and Soviet history with all its victories and violence. All of these outward manifestations of statehood are reinforced by rituals, concerts, and parades that promote the idea of national unity. This ostensibly powerful state can make the air reverberate with thunder as Moscow’s Red Square readies itself for the latest World War II victory parade.

Table 1. **How Ordinary Russians View Their Rulers**

Which of the following statements about the country's rulers is closest to your point of view?	Jul. 1998	Dec. 2007	May 2014	May 2015	Nov. 2016
The people we elect to govern us quickly forget about our problems and do not take the people's interests into account in their work.	45	60	54	55	58
The leadership of the country is a special group of people, the elite, which pursues only its own interests and does not care about us.	29	26	25	26	27
Our government is one with the people; they have the same interests as ordinary people do.	15	8	11	9	10
Difficult to answer.	11	6	11	10	6

Source: Levada Center. The survey was conducted on November 18–21, 2016, using a representative national sample of the urban and rural population. The survey had 1,600 participants aged eighteen and older, living in 137 localities in forty-eight Russian regions. The survey was conducted in the format of personal interviews in respondents' homes. The proportional distribution of answers is presented according to the percentages of the total number of participants, along with data from previous surveys.

But the state has a different side that routinely demonstrates that it is unable to serve basic functions and provide basic services. The regime is capable of using violence to protect itself from its own citizens, but it lacks the resources to sustain the country's human capital, healthcare sector, and education system. Many of its institutions, from the parliament to NGOs, are imitations that mimic the functions they supposedly serve. The government frequently fails to help its citizens, but it is fully capable of resisting them when they have the audacity to ask to be served. The same ordinary Russian who is full of pride that "Crimea is ours!" (*Krym nash!*) and who worships the leader of the state, simultaneously tries to avoid dealing with the state in his day-to-day life, tries to cheat the government just as it tries to cheat him, and strives to minimize all contact with the state.

A CZAR BY DEFAULT

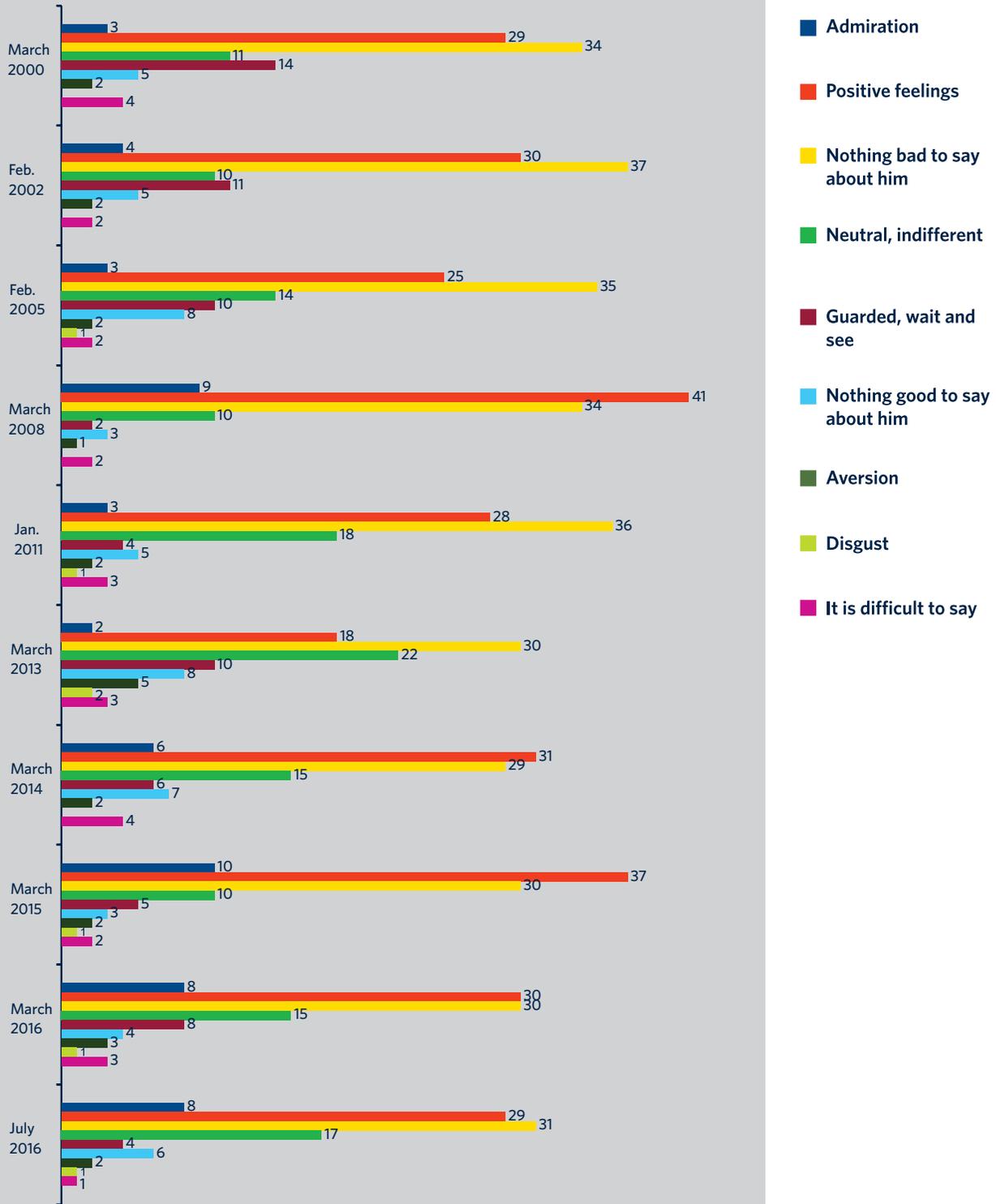
Putin himself has become a symbol of the social consensus between Russian citizens and the political regime about what Russia represents. This consensus is characterized by the official

attitudes of the state that he embodies: an evolution from the authoritarian modernization of the past to an eclectic ideology that combines Russian neo-imperialism with state capitalism.

Yet this consensus does not necessarily translate into the same degree of fervent support for the ideas and actions of the president and his elites that an 80 percent approval rating would suggest. Rather, it is based on support by default, or a kind of indifference. Survey data from April 2017¹⁹ (see figure 1) underscores that the societal base of support for the regime and its leader is amorphous, unstable, and fluid. This indifferent support for Putin is evident from some of the most common responses to the question of how respondents would characterize their attitude toward him: 27 percent of respondents selected the measured answer "I have nothing bad to say about him," while another 17 percent felt neutral or indifferent.

One wonders if heavy state involvement in the economy has any bearing on these results.

Figure 1. Public Attitudes Toward Putin



Source: Levada Center.

After all, the Federal Antimonopoly Service (FAS) estimates that the state and state-owned companies accounted for about 70 percent of Russia's GDP²⁰ in 2015. In a country where 80 percent of citizens approve of Putin and 70 percent of the economy depends on the state, it seems possible that Putin's support stems from a mix of political and economic motivations for at least a segment of the population.

Indifference among Russian citizens manifests itself in a measure of loyalty to, identification with, and support for the existing social order, even when they have limited input into how it is structured. As Ernest Gellner described in his 1994 book *Conditions of Liberty*: "Men prefer to think of themselves as sinners, rather than to damn the system in which they live. . . . We like to accept the universe."²¹ In a similar fashion, Erich Fromm—in his classical analysis *Escape from Freedom*—argues that it is easier to flee from freedom than to try to conquer the challenges that it creates:

*"By becoming part of a power which is felt as unshakably strong, eternal, and glamorous, one participates in its strength and glory. One surrenders one's own self and renounces all strength and pride connected with it, one loses one's integrity as an individual and surrenders freedom; but one gains a new security and a new pride in the participation in the power in which one submerges."*²²

For many Russians, such loyalty to their ruler seems normal—one could say even rational—and it is unlikely to be altered even by sluggish GDP growth or declines in real income. After all, Russia's market economy can likely deliver any goods that people require to survive, including if need be through the country's shadow economy. Putin represents something bigger. He embodies a whole worldview that may collapse only if, as Dmitry Travin—a professor at the European University at St. Petersburg—has noted, "the people begin to suspect that the czar is not authentic."²³

Putin seems to be asserting that he is a czar both domestically and globally. In the eyes of the Russian public, Moscow is dictating its terms to the rest of the world. This is a win-win situation for the czar: if, for instance, the United States becomes Russia's friend, that is a victory—yet if the United States does not befriend Russia, the ideology of being in a besieged fortress will still allow the regime to continue rallying its citizens around the president.

HOLDING BACK CHANGE

For the time being, Putin and his administration do not have strong incentives to pursue sweeping reforms, and few Russians seem to be advocating strongly for radical change.

Putin's rule is an illustration of what in game theory²⁴ is known as a "bad Nash equilibrium," a scenario in which "no player can improve his outcome by changing his own strategy if the other players do not change their strategies." In the case of Russia, as far as ordinary citizens, the state establishment, business people, and national political leaders are concerned, this principle indicates that none of them are willing to make drastic moves unless other players are willing to do the same. Otherwise, it would be too dangerous. In short, the current Russian social contract can be summarized as citizens giving loyalty to the government, and in return Russians receive great-power status and "a thousand-year history"²⁵ (a phrase, conveniently enough, that Putin coined).

The reasons, then, why Russia's ruling elites constantly repeat mantras about the unity of the people in favor of a vaguely articulated set of patriotic values are not hard to fathom. If the people believe that they are unified—even in a situation in which they are dissatisfied with the way the country is governed—things remain stable. That in turn allows the authorities to refrain from large-scale crackdowns on discontented citizens and instead limit themselves to targeted repression and mass propaganda. The regime's use of selective repression is combined with an occasional imitation of liberalization. The most recent vivid example is the appointment of former prime minister Kiriienko, a man with a liberal reputation, to oversee domestic policy in the presidential administration.

Generally speaking, according to Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, two scholars famous for their work on why some repressive regimes survive and others fail, "If repression is too costly, the elite would like to buy off the citizens with promises of policy concessions—for example, income redistribution."²⁶ This may be what the Kremlin is trying to do. But what if there is very little left to redistribute? Acemoglu and Robinson conclude that in many cases heightened inequality renders such reform proposals "more costly" for elites, "mak[ing] repression more attractive relative to democracy and relative to the promise of redistribution. This makes the elites more willing to undertake repression even if it is more costly."²⁷

Yet a regime in this predicament—such as the current Russian leadership—is not terribly eager to step up its use of force, preferring to rely instead on a strategy of selective repression, propaganda, and censorship. The regime fears change more than the potential consequences of continued stagnation. As a result, any kind of systemic reform—especially the transformation or renewal of governing institutions—is impossible. Furthermore, institutional reform makes no sense in isolation: if a country’s regulatory framework remains unchanged and if its leaders’ overall governing approach goes unaltered, then “the new institutional forms are likely to work less well than the ones they replace,” in the words of Douglass North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry Weingast.²⁸ This leaves such a regime with few incentives to initiate reforms. It simply does not believe that reforms can succeed.

PUTIN 2018–2024

The expectations of the Putin 2018 campaign are therefore being kept vague. In the absence of a real political contest, Russia’s 2018 presidential election will be more or less a referendum on public confidence in Putin. The nature of public expectations was expressed in the fervent loyalty of Russian actor Vasily Livanov, who offered a piece of advice, so to speak, when Putin gave him an award at a ceremony hosted by the Kremlin. Livanov said:

*“Recently, when you were in Chelyabinsk, you caused a stir by saying that you were thinking about maybe no longer continuing to be the president . . . You know what, Vladimir Vladimirovich? If you ever look up carefully to the heavens, you will hear a voice that says, ‘Don’t even think about it.’ That will be the voice of our great Motherland, Russia.”*²⁹

As this anecdote indicates, the Russian presidential election’s outcome already seems quite certain, but the fact remains that Russia’s political model is unlikely to stay completely unaltered in the coming years. It will still have to change by the time the country’s next parliamentary elections are held in 2021. The current four-party system will grow outdated as the leaders of the three parties that have played the role of a token opposition for many years likely step down. The ruling party, United Russia, will also have to at least go through the motions of renewal. However, this is not the fundamental problem the country faces.

The real challenge for Russia’s current elite is that during Putin’s fourth term the country’s public institutions will likely decline.

This probably means that Russia’s social safety net will erode; its budgetary system and labor market may face crises; human capital will degrade; and state services, the court system, and law enforcement will continue to deteriorate.³⁰ These risks could be called the 2021 Trap, because by the middle of what, according to the constitution, will be his last term as president, Putin will need to make decisions on how to effect a succession of power and how to respond to Russia’s socioeconomic challenges and institutional degradation.

Russia’s institutional curse is arguably even more dangerous than the country’s resource curse. Putin himself remains the only effective institution in Russia. At the same time, his control of the levers of state power inevitably cannot reach everywhere. In this sense, the question of whether Putin will step aside in 2024 is less important than whether the Putin system can continue to function.

So far, there is every reason to believe that the current system will be sustained, and that the king’s two bodies will stay inviolable. Russian citizens have so far proven to be highly adaptive to domestic conditions, and the country’s elites have displayed almost limitless levels of cynicism and loyalty. This means that Russia’s current regime will resist change and will regard any attempts at reform or manifestations of discontent as harmful assaults on the stability of the existing political order. A system that makes no progress almost inevitably begins to rot despite attempts to keep all change on ice, but this kind of erosion is likely to be a long-term process. Yet, over the long haul, it is precisely this kind of balancing act that can carry risks of a sudden and instantaneous collapse.

NOTES

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- 4 Andrey Pertsev, “Following Orders: Putin’s New Strongmen Governors,” Carnegie Moscow Center, August 3, 2016, <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=64237>.
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- 9 In a recent article, Daron Acemoğlu described this kind of regime as “personal rule” and likened Putin to Hugo Chavez, Recep Erdoğan, and—the latest addition to the club—Donald Trump. Nevertheless, in my opinion, the U.S. system has much stronger institutions than the deinstitutionalized Russian system and can therefore better stand up against a personal type (or, in the case of Trump, a personal style) of governance.
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- 13 “Iosif Kobzon: Putin zhenat na Rossii” [Iosif Kobzon: Putin is married to Russia], Mir 24, January 14, 2015, <http://mir24.tv/news/society/11908131>.
- 14 Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies*, 216.
- 15 Philip Manow, *In the King’s Shadow: The Political Anatomy of Democratic Representation*, (New York: Polity, 2010).
- 16 In a private conversation with the author, an expert who oversees the preparation of one category of reforms at the Center for Strategic Development noted, “This regime isn’t personalist yet. It will become personalist if the first person rids himself of the influence of the *siloviki* and the special services. Then he will have a chance to carry out authoritarian modernization.” Private conversation, Moscow, fall 2016.
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- 23 Dmitry Travin, *Prosushchestvuyet li putinskaya sistema do 2042 goda?* [Will the Putin system survive until 2042?], (St. Petersburg, 2016), 165.
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- 27 Acemoğlu and Robinson, 188.
- 28 Douglas North, John Wallis, and Barry Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 438.
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- 30 Please consult the Center for Strategic Development’s website to find the results of some pertinent Russian-language diagnostic seminars and risk assessments: <http://csr.ru/>.

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