

## THE RUSSIAN REGIME IN 2015: ALL TACTICS, NO STRATEGY

ANDREI KOLESNIKOV | SEPTEMBER 2015

The first half of 2015 demystified several key characteristics of the Russian regime. While the Kremlin continues to score plenty of tactical victories in the political sphere, which help sustain President Vladimir Putin's sky-high popularity, the regime has demonstrated no ability to think strategically—let alone to establish clear, achievable goals or to offer a model of what the future should look like. The lack of strategic thinking stems from the elites' desire to preserve their own power and the whims of an authoritarian political system that imitates democratic niceties while using its sprawling propaganda apparatus to stoke aggressive nationalism.

High oil prices and economic growth during the early 2000s fostered complacency among the ruling elites and helped create a deficit of strategic thinking. Structural reforms were avoided in sectors connected with the country's human capital, such as healthcare, education, and the pension system. Yet the regime and, by extension, the public see the current political and economic stagnation as a new normal. The perverse nature of this reaction to recent developments has even given rise to new terminology among economic policy experts, who dubbed the situation a “noncrisis crisis.”<sup>1</sup>

For their part, Putin and other high-ranking officials continue to insist that Russia faces a minor and short-lived crisis. In their eyes, Russia is experiencing the peak of its capitalist

development, a happy end-of-history moment, Russian-style. That overconfident reaction means that no one at the top has the least desire to start making concessions to the political opposition, the West, or the pro-reform lobby that consists primarily of the financial elite and representatives of the managerial class.

Declining living standards, weaker economic growth, persistent ruble exchange rate volatility, and higher inflation are not treated by the authorities as serious problems. Any criticism is rejected out of hand; negative forecasts are viewed as tantamount to acts of sabotage. Further deterioration of economic indicators will presumably be presented as part of the new norm as well—this way, the authorities can both convince

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themselves and deceive the public. In turn, the public is adapting and getting used to making do with less and less.

This is a serious crisis, of course—but since perception is reality in Russia, it's better to do nothing. That's why Sergei Ivanov, Putin's powerful chief of staff, implied in an interview with the *Financial Times* in June 2015 that NATO's behavior was distracting the Russian government from undertaking structural reform.<sup>2</sup>

Other high-level discussion of structural reforms is largely a tool to test the political waters. Witness the uproar when former finance minister Alexei Kudrin, in retaliation for the decision to reschedule parliamentary elections from December 2016 to September 2016, proposed early presidential elections at the same time (instead of in 2018) to give Russia's head of state a strong public mandate for conducting reforms.

The frightened political class reacted immediately. Many figures clearly sensed they were being tested by Putin himself; after all, the Russian president is still on good terms with Kudrin, a longtime friend and colleague. Nevertheless, the political elites practically fell over themselves to reaffirm their loyalty to Putin and assail the idea of early presidential elections. They know the drill. This is how nearly all Soviet leaders, from Stalin to Brezhnev, tested the elites' loyalty. Nearly every time, Russia's cautious elites demonstrated their servility to the leader—and their hostility to reforms.

Elites are becoming sensitized to such provocations. Therefore, they respond to any demands for liberalization with absurd and harsh proposals. For example, the notorious law on "foreign agents" has been supplemented with a new law on "undesirable" organizations. Members of the Duma and the Federation Council, the two houses of the Russian legislature, try to outdo each other with harsh statements about the West—there are few better ways to demonstrate one's loyalty to the authorities. Against this backdrop,

the current Russian elites bear an ever-greater resemblance to their Stalin-era predecessors.

## GETTING RUSSIA OFF ITS KNEES

The widespread belief that Russia's dignity has now been restored after a series of violations at the hands of the West helps account for Putin's soaring approval ratings. Yet the very meaning of the word dignity merits a brief discussion here. As the Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalit wrote in his book *The Decent Society*, "A civilized society is one whose members do not humiliate one another, while a decent society is one in which the institutions do not humiliate people."<sup>3</sup> In other types of societies, state institutions treat people like objects, animals, or children who cannot take responsibility for themselves—at least, not quite yet.

For many Russians, only a humiliated person can live on his or her knees. That means that the process of restoring dignity is tantamount to rising from one's knees, a distinctively Russian metaphor for acquiring dignity.

So what has Russia's longtime president actually accomplished? According to an August 2014 opinion poll, his greatest achievement has been restoring Russia's great-power status.<sup>4</sup> Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many citizens felt humiliated by defeat in the Cold War. Now they have risen from their knees thanks largely to Russia's opposition to and defiance of the West. These past humiliations have been obliterated by the construction of a besieged fortress within the country's expanded borders. In the process, Russia has all but severed its ties to Euro-Atlantic civilization.

Here's how this effort works in political terms. Restoring Russia's great-power status has become code for restoring dignity. Accomplishments in the foreign policy realm compensate for the fact that there has been no restoration of dignity inside the country. A five-minute conversation with most Russian citizens will reveal that they still feel totally defenseless in the face of pressure from big and small bosses, utility

companies, fire and tax inspectors, courts, the police, military draft boards, and even random street patrols by Cossacks.

At the same time, the post-Soviet Russian citizen seems satisfied by (or pretends to be satisfied by) a feeling of belonging to something big and faceless, a crowd that shares pride in itself and its leader. The average Russian once again feels proud to be different from everyone else and is ready to suffer on behalf of the greater good.

This complicated construct can be summarized as “Crimea in exchange for freedom,” which captures the current division of labor between the regime and the man in the street. Crimea, which Moscow annexed in March 2014, becomes a broader metaphor for the image of Russia as a besieged fortress that takes pride in past accomplishments. Such achievements include Russia’s victory in the 1939 Winter War against Finland, revisionist accounts of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which led to Soviet annexations of a number of neighboring territories during World War II and the division of Poland’s territory, or even Moscow’s 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia during the Prague Spring.

Soviet-era generations had a far different set of milestones, and they sought to explain the struggle to build communism in historical terms by focusing on the images of freedom and dignity that are traceable in events such as the 1825 Decembrist revolt and the abolition of serfdom in the nineteenth century.

There is another very simple explanation of why Putin’s popularity is still growing in the face of economic deterioration. Paternalism has deep roots in Russian society, and at times of crisis, vulnerable segments of the population, especially those unable to fend for themselves, look to the state for help. For understandable reasons, they are loath to oppose the institution that is feeding them. The fact that the state is closely associated with the Putin brand creates a virtuous cycle for the president. And according to a June 2015 opinion poll,

his approval rating has reached stratospheric levels close to 90 percent.<sup>5</sup>

When it comes to divisive issues, many citizens happily identify themselves with the state. Thus, human rights violations are a legitimate way to rid Russian society of foreign influences. Abuses of power by the authorities are often perceived as part and parcel of the regime’s legitimate right to protect the majority from a subversive minority of society.

### **A COUNTRY OF BROKEN GUARDRAILS**

After the start of the war in eastern Ukraine between government forces and Russian-backed separatists, a great many things that had previously been prohibited in Russia received an official blessing. Now that the boundaries of what’s permissible have expanded—for example, a covert war against a neighboring country has been repackaged as a defensive and just conflict—some of the dark pages in Russia’s history are being reevaluated. Angry, hostile language has become the norm in political discourse.

Instead of unifying Russia, the war has effectively split the nation into two camps: the loyal ones and the unpatriotic ones, or those who are happy abiding by the new rules of normative behavior and those who refuse to toe the party line.

Defining prescriptions and norms for citizens is a classic trait of totalitarian systems, not authoritarian ones. The Putin regime has not formulated a latter-day version of the Soviet-era Moral Code of the Builder of Communism, a set of twelve moral rules that members of the Communist Party were expected to follow, but a certain sense of appropriate and inappropriate behavior clearly already exists. Just try refusing one of the free black-and-orange St. George’s ribbons—a symbol of Russian military valor—that are handed out on the street, and your behavior could be deemed amoral, or at the very least deviant.

Just a few years ago, it was customary to focus on the loss of life during military operations. Today's normative behavior is to keep quiet about such matters because that is what the state wants. Citizens' behavioral model is supported by a normative act—a presidential decree that makes these losses a state secret. Despite objections from human rights advocates that the law violates the Russian constitution and the law on state secrets, there are no effective mechanisms to appeal the expansion of the state's list of classified information to include information on Russian military losses during peacetime special operations.

Cooperation between the public and the security services is also becoming morally acceptable and supported by new legislation. For instance, cooperation with investigative bodies is now counted toward one's work experience.<sup>6</sup>

Essentially, Russian citizens are confronted by a new, unwritten code of normatively approved behavior. It runs the gamut from staying silent on the subject of state secrets (there's a war going on, after all) and wearing St. George's ribbons to taking vacations in Crimea, espousing positive feelings toward China, keeping an open mind about brazenly revisionist views of Russia's history, and embracing an artificial level of Russian Orthodox religious zeal.

Perhaps the most damage is done when it comes to the public's view of the Other. All of the standard guardrails seem to fall down when the topic at hand is how to stand up to the rest of the world and the fifth column inside the country. Extremely aggressive and hostile speech, especially on television and social networks, is now the norm. High levels of intolerance toward minorities, Westerners, and homegrown liberals is perfectly acceptable.

This climate of aggression and violence also provided a foundation for the February 2015 murder of opposition politician Boris Nemtsov. Much to this observer's surprise, the killing did not shock or shake up Russian society. On the contrary,

the border of what is permissible actually expanded: a political murder is now acceptable if it serves the greater good. As a member of the Russian elite put it privately: "If you want to become a real politician in today's Russia, you have to brace yourself for three things: you can be thrown in jail; your loved ones can end up in jail; and in the end, you can be killed."

Russia is once again on warlike footing, and the authorities want citizens to believe that they are living in a besieged medieval fortress. The authorities feed this impression with constant references to attacks by hostile forces, foreign agents, and undesirable organizations. The fifth column and national traitors are destroying the fortress's spiritual bonds from within. All these terms have a catchy ring in Russian and were made politically popular by the head of state himself. They have also had a pervasive influence on the body of repressive laws, which were adopted after Putin returned to the presidency in 2012.

The return of glib, loose talk about nuclear war is another indication that the guardrails of the past have stopped working. Arguably, that makes the current situation even worse than it was at the height of the Cold War, when two nuclear superpowers squared off on a regular basis. At that time, the rules of conduct were clearly formulated, and it was mutually understood that any nuclear exchange would have no winners.<sup>7</sup> Nowadays, who knows?

The deterioration of normal restraints on behavior and political discourse can have far-ranging implications. At worst, there is plenty of evidence that Russian political culture is systematically becoming more primitive and coarse. It's easy to find accounts on social media of Kick Obama contests on Youth Day in some provincial Russian town. Participants, who are invited to kick a cardboard cutout of the U.S. president, are told that "holy Russia is rising from its knees with each kick!"<sup>8</sup> Even in cosmopolitan locales like Moscow, one can find shockingly racist imagery and caricatures of Barack Obama. It's hard

to imagine that these materials have appeared spontaneously without some form of official encouragement.

## MANAGING THE PAST

The Russian regime is actively trying to derive its legitimacy from the past. That helps explain the recent surge in the authorities' interest in the Stalin era and the promotion of a gradual reappraisal of Stalin's historical accomplishments. Putin himself has tried to justify the 1939 Winter War against Finland, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

In addition, the regime is trying to manage the past. Russia's general prosecutor has engaged in comical attempts to analyze the Soviet-era legislative decisions that transferred Crimea from the jurisdiction of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic to that of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Similar analysis is being performed with respect to the legitimacy of the Baltic countries' independence after the Soviet collapse.

The reevaluation of the past extends to the August 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia. Earlier in 2015, one of Russia's national television channels aired a new documentary, *The Warsaw Pact: Pages Declassified*, that clumsily justified the 1968 events. According to the film, the invasion was merely a reaction to the evil designs of NATO and the German *Bundeswehr*, which had been fomenting the overthrow of the Czechoslovak government. The documentary was supposed to have conjured up associations with the 2014 Maidan uprising in Ukraine by presenting an ostensibly similar scenario of a Western-backed street protest. To highlight the similarities, the half-stern, half-ironic voice of the narrator bitterly and indignantly denounced the Prague Spring.

It is quite obvious that the film was not intended for foreign audiences; it was merely an attempt to transpose events from nearly fifty years ago onto the present. Russia's current

population, many of whom have had the good fortune not to live under a socialist system for the past twenty-odd years, were blithely told that Soviet troops were brought in to protect socialist achievements. NATO troops had been moved from Swabia in southern Germany to the Czechoslovak frontier, and nearly 300,000 German troops were already inside Czechoslovakia. The documentary even alleged that stockpiles of NATO weapons had been uncovered, as had plans for a Maidan-like revolt.

The spin masters said absolutely nothing about the will of the masses or the inconvenient fact that the people of Czechoslovakia simply wanted to live different lives. Not everyone has a sense of humor about this oversight, of course. The Czech foreign ministry responded to the provocation immediately, summoning Moscow's ambassador in Prague to provide an explanation.

History has once again been nationalized and monopolized. The officially approved version of history is becoming a key instrument for manipulating public opinion and managing the effects of the country's current political and economic stagnation.

## ELECTIONS: AN EMPTY SHELL

The recent initiative to move the date of Russia's 2016 parliamentary election from December to September is another reflection of the dead end into which the authorities have steered themselves. The brazen move speaks volumes about the limitations of the current political process, the elites' propensity to speak in purely hysterical terms, and the authorities' overriding need to preserve their own power at all costs.

Perhaps never in post-Soviet Russia's political history has the justification of the regime's actions looked so helpless and artificial. Never before have ordinary people paid so little attention to the regime's political maneuverings. In fact, political apathy appears to fluctuate at the same

levels as popular support for the regime. Against this backdrop of apathetic support, the political contortions of the government are greeted with the same collective shrug as a fleeting change in the weather.

The shift in the timeline for the parliamentary election will ensure greater control over the election process because it is believed that people will not have enough time to return to their normal routine after their summer vacations. The Kremlin is betting that voters will be in a better mood in September than in December and therefore more likely to express their benevolent indifference to the regime at the polls. Of course, that assumes that the country's protracted economic recession or a new wave of crisis won't exacerbate existing social problems. In the end, changing the election date is probably unlikely to affect anything. Clearly, the authorities are fearful and nervous, eagerly trying to exercise control over the slightest change in voters' thoughts and behavior.

Many of these efforts are manifested in legal changes, the continued degradation of respect for the rule of law, and the overall decline in legal culture. The recent law on undesirable organizations is a clear illustration of this trend. The lower house of parliament, the Duma, has also initiated amendments to the law on police powers, and the Constitutional Court ruled in July that Russia might opt to comply only selectively with the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. While some legal aspects are still under discussion, the head of the Constitutional Court has issued a clear description of his position, which is nearly official: Russia will accept only good (read: convenient) verdicts of the European court. It doesn't really matter if such a position represents a trampling of basic international legal norms or the hierarchy of law that is laid out in the constitution of the Russian Federation, which explicitly recognizes the supremacy of international law over domestic legislation.

Of course, the authorities can always come up with legal or, rather, quasi-legal justifications for any decision—it's just a matter of applying their legal savvy. But such tactics are inexorably dragging Russia toward a situation in which state legislation could be based on quasi- or blatantly nonlegal grounds, just as the Stalin regime amended political elements of the Soviet criminal code.

The law on undesirable foreign and international organizations is aimed at choking off the operations of foreign structures, both commercial and noncommercial, on Russian soil. The restrictions can be imposed solely at the general prosecutor's discretion, although he is supposed to coordinate his efforts with other executive agencies and law enforcement bodies.

The Kremlin orchestrated a formal request by the Federation Council, the upper house of parliament, to investigate the activities of twelve Western organizations via a unanimous vote on a so-called patriotic stop list in early July. While only one organization, the U.S.-based National Endowment for Democracy, has been formally designated to date, this useful complement to the law on foreign agents will contribute to an even more aggressive stance against everything foreign and foster an atmosphere of suspicion among the general population. And by deliberately delaying movement on the Federation Council's request, the authorities clearly hope to intimidate organizations that want to continue their activities.

Proposed amendments to the law on police powers would give police officers considerably greater latitude in using weapons and conducting searches. To cite just one lamentable example: the police are currently prohibited by law from firing their weapons at women, but under the proposed amendments, the sole restriction in the future would apply to firing on pregnant women. Other changes appear intended to give the authorities the upper hand in managing political protests, for example by removing the need

for a warrant to search citizens or vehicles. If adopted, the changes will help propel Russia toward the creation of an actual police state.

Finally, the ruling on the limited jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights on Russian territory directly contradicts the concept of the hierarchy of laws known to any first-year law student. So far, Russia's noncompliance is limited to political declarations, but it creates quasi-legal grounds for ignoring the politically inconvenient judgments of the Strasbourg-based court in the future if need be. Such treatment of the European Court of Human Rights also points to Russia's overall drift toward legal isolationism.

### **THE RUSSIAN CUL-DE-SAC**

It's hard not to look at current events without developing a clear sense that the modern Russian regime is on the road to disaster. At best, one can safely predict a descent into a lengthy period of political, economic, and intellectual stagnation. At worst, the situation threatens to spin out of control and overwhelm the Kremlin's mastery of the economic and political systems that were refined under Putin.

Unfortunately, Russia's earlier progress toward joining the international mainstream is now being reversed at full tilt, and the new path of development looks more like a Möbius strip of repeating age-old mistakes and tragedies. The key question is how many more decades it will take for the country to escape its rather monotonous trajectory of underdevelopment and truly epic governance shortcomings.

Both in Soviet times and today, Russia's rulers equated their interests with those of the state, which in turn they equated with those of the entire country. As a result, the state has been reduced to little more than a group of private individuals: the leader's inner circle and the top echelon of financial and political elites. A key problem of this model

is the fact that the ruling group must use resources that rightfully belong to society as a whole to preserve its own power. Luckily for those at the top, most ordinary Russian citizens are still unable to see the situation for what it is and are easily lured in directions that create sources of support for the status quo.

The overarching goal of maintaining power distorts budgetary priorities and the structure of the Russian economy. Economic competition is not desirable, since the rulers count on the state and state-run corporations to dominate. The regime jealously guards control of the fungible resources of the federal budget, using them for activities such as defense, security, public administration, and propaganda that help ensure the regime's own longevity. (That's why it's really no surprise that the government could recently make a decision to appropriate an additional 7 billion rubles—\$104 million—for the Channel 1 and VGTRK television channels at a time of severe budgetary constraints.)

The aim of ensuring the preservation of the leader and the elites no longer includes any attempts at modernization from above—let alone economic liberalization or the democratization of society as a whole. That singular purpose will animate the regime through the 2016 parliamentary and 2018 presidential elections. Even after those near-term hurdles are surmounted, the regime will probably be at a loss to supply a more compelling vision for the future or a coherent strategy for achieving it. This constant focus on short-term goals may creep into the next political cycle as well, raising inevitable questions about the regime's inability to think strategically.

Meanwhile, the new social contract of "Crimea in exchange for freedom" is likely to remain in effect and, for the time being at least, help the regime absorb the negative impact of Russia's deteriorating socioeconomic conditions. But there will come a time when the regime will have to offer the public something new, not the well-worn Crimea card.

An economic miracle is definitely not one of the options. Nor can Russia seriously contemplate fighting a war with the West, especially on a large scale, because Russia's resources are limited. The regime may indulge in symbolic steps, such as a new, feel-good "The Arctic Is Ours" campaign. But the benefits of such ploys will likely wear off rather quickly. The Russian leadership is slowly gearing up for another jog along the Möbius strip, which is bound to end at a strategic impasse.

## NOTES

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