

GOING TO THE PEOPLE—AND BACK AGAIN: THE CHANGING SHAPE OF THE RUSSIAN REGIME

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Revolutionary or dynamic regimes around the world tend to encourage supporters to act independently, or even engage in decentralized violence. By contrast, more conservative, static regimes typically discourage and distrust such unplanned, spontaneous demonstrations of support. For most of Russian history, the country's leaders have employed a top-down political system. When Crimea was annexed in 2014, the Kremlin temporarily allowed more decentralized patriotic activism to rally support, but they soon saw the potential risks and reverted to more centralized political control. Russia's reinstated traditional conservative rule may seem dull, but, paradoxically enough, its return might prove beneficial to future reformers.

Russia's Short-Lived Embrace of Patriotic Activism

- Starting in the early 2000s—and increasingly after the emergence of genuine public opposition rallies within Russia in 2011–2012 and following the annexation of Crimea in 2014—the Kremlin pushed back against critics by rallying pro-government grassroots support. In doing this, the Russian regime had to depart from its established conservative, hierarchical relationship with the people.
- Initially, the Russian government supported mostly patriotic youth organizations. When these groups proved ineffectual, the Kremlin turned to a broader array of state-sanctioned patriotic activists, who targeted perceived domestic enemies of Russia.
- Patriotic activism and amateur violence peaked during the 2013–2014 Maidan protests and the war in Eastern Ukraine. The Kremlin's reliance on hybrid warfare imposed limits on direct government participation and created a need for nationalistic volunteers.
- Although top Russian leaders did not orchestrate most of these patriotic activists' actions, the Russian government employed new laws and political rhetoric that stoked fear and legitimized the decentralized violence that occurred.

A Return to More Centralized Rule

- Russia's leaders have since realized that this uncoordinated grassroots support does not fit with and may endanger their customary top-down style of rule. A dynamic relationship between rulers and supporters unnerves Russian bureaucrats—it requires maintaining communication with supporters, tolerating bottom-up initiatives, and competing with informal activists.
- The Russian regime still seeks to maintain its legitimacy through institutions. It is not interested in their destruction or the loss of its monopoly on force.
- The government appears to be curbing the popularity of pro-Russian volunteers active in Ukraine, who were excluded from the September 2016 State Duma elections.
- The Russian public seems to share the Kremlin's preferences. Citizens of conservative regimes often become afraid and confused when activists, not government officials, take up arms against enemies to defend national values.
- Dynamic regimes are often difficult to reform because both bureaucrats and citizens are in thrall to state ideology, whereas static conservative regimes may be more conducive to eventual reforms.

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