Putin Redux: Continuity and change


Is Putinism a static system, or is it in need of renewal after the events of the past year? Richard Sakwa discusses the options before the Russian president and the elites that surround him.

Putin is back, but this is a different Putin and a different country. Putin certainly retains many of his former characteristics, and those who hoped for a ‘Putin 2.0’ to return to the presidency in May 2012 have been disappointed. If anything, the changes in Putin have been only the intensification of previous traits: a profound belief in the rectitude of his judgment and course, accompanied by a deep distrust of competitive politics as a means to achieve rational decisions. He of course is not alone in the latter, and several European countries have recently experienced periods of technocratic rule when the democratic process has been found wanting. But what in other countries has been temporary and conditional, in Putin’s Russia has become the essence of the system.

From centripetal to centrifugal centrism

It is here that national changes come into play. The essence of Putinism is the constant absorption by the political centre of policy, personnel and power in general. The Putinite centre is a dynamic constellation that seeks to ensure that all major competing policy orientations are given a degree of influence, but strives to guarantee that none can predominate. Thus macroeconomic policy was previously broadly liberal, energy policy dirigiste, social policy welfarist, nationality policy inclusive but with an ethnic Russian face, and foreign policy statist. All the major constituencies in Russia could feel that they had a stake in the system, even though none achieved the full satisfaction of their agendas.

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Liberals were disappointed that politics remained manipulative and that elections were flawed, but felt that the system was flexible enough to allow for a possible evolution that would let them achieve more of their goals. However, with ex-president Dmitry Medvedev’s unceremonious expulsion from the Kremlin, they can no longer have any confidence that the present regime offers them prospects for greater power. Equally, nationalists were at first pleased by the restoration of the rhetoric of Russian statehood, the defeat of the Chechen insurgency, and the fist waving at the West, but they too are beginning to see a stronger future for themselves in a post-Putin Russia.

The division of the spoils of the commodity boom was also distributed adequately to ensure, if not the loyalty, then the acquiescence of major social groups and constituencies. None were entirely
happy, but none were so unhappy as to risk losing what they had by rocking the boat and demanding radical change.

A change of leader, or the unleashing of the assumed potential of an autonomous Medvedev leadership, threatened a major reshaping of this system of rewards, and it was not clear who stood to gain most. Hence the safe option was to stick with Putin.

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This has now changed. Groups are beginning to believe that their policies could gain greater traction through modification of the regime. There is no mass defection of elites, and with the next round of elections five years away, no immediate pressure for change.

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However, this makes it all the more incumbent on Putin to enunciate a vision for Russia’s future in the next decade. In technical terms, more of the same would work, since contrary to much hysterical commentary in the West, the regime is nowhere near collapse and the country is not badly governed. However, the political environment has changed, as have the challenges facing the country.

Ambiguities of protest

Until 24th September 2011, when Putin announced his planned return to the presidency, with Medvedev swapping roles to become prime minister, sticking with the status quo paradoxically contained the promise of potentially radical intra-systemic change and evolution. It was this potential that was apparently stifled, if not killed, by the change. Not only did this cynical and contemptuous ‘castling’ move evoke popular disgust but, following the flawed parliamentary elections on 4th December, widespread popular protest indicated that the mystical bond (enhanced by rather less than mystical media manipulation) that had united Putin and the people was fraying. This current of popular protest will undoubtedly ebb and flow, but will not disappear, and it signals that the regime has to find new forms of popular legitimisation.

Protest will take the form not only of demonstrations and marches, but also various ‘spectacles’ of the Pussy Riot sort. From French Marxist theorist Guy Debord [2]’s perspective, of course, such dramatic acts as the invasion of holy spaces paradoxically only reinforces the ‘society of the spectacle’, rather than restoring the centrality of an individual’s physical and moral worth. It strengthens the Putinite externalisation of responsibility and the contingency of conscience. Even the body becomes little more than an instrument of politics; and the power of words, rationality and reasoned debate is trumped by the spectacular gesture. Of course, throwing cats is preferable to throwing bombs, but in terms of the monological character of the event, they have something in common.[1] [3]

In other words, much of the protest against the Putinite system is itself Putinite in character – depoliticised, mute and gestural – indicating the deep social roots of the present system. Vladimir Pastukhov has recently argued [4] that Putinism as a historical phenomenon is much larger than Putin the man, and reflects the traditional estrangement in Russia between the state and society. From this perspective, getting rid of Putin would hardly change the structures of power and the fundamental relationships between social actors.

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This is a powerful argument, but it has two possible political corollaries. The first is the encouragement of political passivity, since getting rid of one lot of scoundrels runs the risk of only opening the door to another lot, eager to satiate their hunger, and thus there would be another frenzy of ‘redistribution of property’. The second is the precise opposite, an attempt to root out these deep behavioural and cultural attributes, and thus encourage new forms of revolutionary radicalism, a new cultural revolution to destroy the foundations of bureaucratic power.

A solid part of the protest movement draws on the ideals of the liberal intelligentsia, hoping finally to see the restoration of the aspirations of the perestroika-era vision of a free and democratic Russia, and for whom the tricolour flag remains a symbol of a radical republicanism built on the foundations of free and equal citizenship. Surveys of marchers have clearly identified this educated, mature and liberal contingent.

A new report issued by the Minchenko Consulting Group describes Putin's inner circle as Politburo 2.0. Minchenko identify eight political and business heavyweights around Putin.

However, not all protest is ‘democratic’ in the sense suggested here. Even in the late perestroika years there was rapid variegation within the ranks of the movement. Attempts by ‘Democratic Russia’ to hold the broad movement together failed. Today this differentiation is no less marked, and runs along similar lines. Radical nationalists contest with xenophobes, a refoundational left-wing struggles against systemic Communists, while the liberals fight among themselves. Only if there was adequate common commitment to the principles of the constitutional state would regime change strengthen the rule of law and enlarge the sphere of freedom; but in present circumstances, this is a
rather large ‘if’, and one which the regime exploits.

The Putin system

As I have indicated above, Putinism has both systemic and structural characteristics, but it is also a system of personal rule. One of the paradoxes of the contemporary system is that observers can veer between radical extremes of analysis, often with barely a pause for breath. Putin at one moment is endowed with almost dictatorial powers, a great demiurge who manages and decides everything to the smallest detail, from the alleged murder of Alexander Litvinenko [5] (technically, the courts in Britain have not yet established that homicide was committed) to the prosecution of a female action group with musical ambitions. At the same time, he is considered little more than the tool of a ruling class, who would ditch him if he came to threaten their interests or if a better leader came along.

The tension between power and powerlessness is a real one, and Putin’s statecraft has traditionally sustained itself precisely by drawing on the power of this contradiction. Putin has the remarkable ability to portray himself as everything and nothing at the same time, galley slave and great helmsman.

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In terms of statecraft, Putin’s political genius lies in balancing the factions against each other. A recent study [6] issued by the Minchenko consulting agency [7], based on expert surveys with 60 leading political scientists, business leaders, politicians and practitioners, identified a ‘Politburo 2.0’ at the heart of the system consisting of eight individuals, some of whom had nothing directly to do with politics. The key powerholders in contemporary Russia were identified as Igor Sechin [8], Sergei Chemezov [9], Gennady Timchenko [10], Yuri Kovalchuk [11], Sergei Sobyanin, Sergei Ivanov, Vyacheslav Volodin [12] and Dmitry Medvedev. This so-called Politburo does not of course meet as a collective, yet it represents the heart of the informal constellation of power.

A bloc of ‘Politburo candidates’ was also identified, including head of the Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill [13], the leaders of the parliamentary parties and, surprisingly, Mikhail Prokhorov, the businessman who ran as a liberal candidate in the presidential elections.

The model suggests that Russia is ruled by a number of clans linked by business interests, common Soviet-era backgrounds, and in certain cases family relationships. The key elite groups were identified as the ‘force’ (the ‘siloviki’), ‘political’, ‘technical’ and ‘entrepreneurial’ factions.

Putin crowns the system, balancing interests and preventing any single one becoming predominant. To do so, as I argued above, would threaten his own independence, rendering him potentially hostage to a single faction; but at the same time, he cannot be seen as a mortal threat to any of the groups, since that would render him a liability for them. In other words, he has to have enough power to prevent factional conflict spiralling out of control and becoming a war of all against all; but at the same time this power has to be disguised and shared, to allow key constituencies to retain a stake in the system.

Putin’s statecraft in crisis

It is this model of statecraft that has now entered a crisis. This may appear to be a counter-intuitive conclusion. After all, Putin has once again weathered a succession operation and achieved his goal, with relatively little collateral damage and with no real ‘colour revolution’ in prospect. Yet his system of rule, if the not the system itself, shows sign of exhaustion. Putin’s return has destabilised the system that he so assiduously created, although in formal terms matters continue much as before.
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What are the symptoms of this crisis? First, the unity of the elite shows signs of fragmenting. In this respect, 28th September 2010, the day that Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov was summarily dismissed by Medvedev, is as important a date as 24th September 2011. Luzhkov’s removal [14] followed a prolonged media campaign aimed at blackening his character. Although Luzhkov had never been a trusted Putinite, he had certainly been willing to work within the system, joining the governing council of United Russia. Some other long-standing regional heavy-weights were purged at this time (notably, in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan), suggesting a coordinated attempt at elite renewal. However, the brutal and incoherent manner in which Luzhkov was dismissed prefigured the ‘castling’ move a year later, and demonstrated how even a senior political figure in the establishment could be treated. Luzhkov has now emerged as a leading critic of the regime, and even appeals to the Gorbachevian spirit that ‘It is impossible to live like this’. [Yuri Luzhkov, I tak zhit’ nel’zya... Besedy s politikom i grazhdaninom (Moscow, Veche, 2012).]

Soon afterwards Alexei Kudrin, the veteran minister of finances, speaking in Krasnoyarsk and other centres, called for the forthcoming elections to be free and fair. The rather sad episode of Mikhail Prokhorov’s short-lived leadership of the Right Cause party in mid 2011 further revealed that traditional forms of political management were becoming less effective. 'Medvedev had successfully gained a political identity of his own, aligning himself with gradual political liberalisation, partnership with the Western powers, and less statist economic policies. What he had failed to do was gain political autonomy.'

Second, the regime has lost its best chance of a achieving a gradual evolution to some different form of political authority without threatening the property and power settlement of the Putin years. Part of the reason for declining elite coherence was of course the fact that Medvedev clearly entertained hopes of a second run at the presidency. He had successfully gained a political identity of his own, aligning himself with gradual political liberalisation, partnership with the Western powers, and less statist economic policies. What he had failed to do was gain political autonomy. Faction management remained Putin’s responsibility. The Medvedev presidency and its liberalising acolytes represented no more than just another faction, and not the most powerful one at that. In other words, the attempt to provide an evolutionary option from within the Putin system was defeated by the character of the system itself. A faction could not overcome the logic of factionalism. In September 2012 this faction was dealt a stunning, although not entirely unexpected, blow from which it has not yet recovered.

Third, although the protests worked to the advantage of the ‘modernising’ part of the elite, with the package of liberal reforms announced at the end of December in part a response to mass mobilisation, this group feared calling on society for support. This would have been one way for the faction to have become a party, and for politics in general to have become ‘normalised’, but the risks would have been high. There is no evidence that the Medvedev modernisers seriously contemplated appealing to the people for support, and thus probably lost their historical opportunity. Equally, it is far from sure that there was enough popular support for their liberal strategy. Part of the protest movement supports the long-term aspirations of the Medvedev ‘modernisers’, but despite much rhetoric about the growth of the ‘middle class’, this remains a decidedly minority constituency. Medvedev’s personal prestige has also suffered irreversible damage, despite his own stated ambitions to have another run at the presidency.

Conclusion

The old factional constellation has changed, with the democratic statists around Vladislav Surkov [15] losing whatever residual coherent identity they ever had. The modernisers remain grouped around Medvedev in the government, and fight for their positions on a daily basis. The Putin system
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is still trying to maintain factional balance, and for that it needs the liberals, however demoralised, to balance the hard-line statists grouped around Igor Sechin. The division now is beginning to take on an overtly political form, with regime-sponsored ideational programmes giving way to more openly ideological conflict over development strategies and modernisation plans. By definition, the conservatives cannot appeal to the street, whereas the liberals can exploit and, even in circumstances of political conflict, mobilise popular support. They failed to do this once, but this does not mean that this is forever excluded. The politicisation of elite competition would deal a death blow to the Putinite technocratic system of political management.

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An associated aspect of what is increasingly ‘mismanaged democracy’ is the declining coherence of legislative and policy initiatives in the sphere of political management. Some of the repressive legislation emerging from the Sixth Duma bears signs of ad hoc independent political entrepreneurship by United Russia and its allies.

So, Putin is back, but the country and the political system have evolved. New forms of political statecraft are called for. A tightening of the screws would represent a political defeat of the system itself, shifting towards overt coercion and losing whatever remains of the inner resources of dynamism and renewal. This would play into the hands of those many voices now predicting the decline and fall of the regime. However, the third Putin term may yet see a new synthesis emerge. A positive reinvention of Russian political order requires an act of unprecedented leadership and political imagination. There is everything to play for, otherwise Putin’s redux will remain unrevived and unrenewed.

[1] [16] Some time before their orgy of 29th February 2008 in Moscow’s Museum of Biology, members of the Voina [17] kollektiv threw cats over the counter of a MacDonald’s. Leaving aside the feelings of the cats, work in MacDonald’s, one would have thought, is hard enough without having cats thrown at you. Spare a thought for the workers!

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