

# Vladimir Putin's Russia

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## Upcoming Presidential Election in Russia and Putin 4.0 System

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The Russian presidential election will take place in a month, but the winner is already clear. The only candidate capable of receiving wider support from voters, Alexey Navalny, has been banned from registering as a candidate due to his criminal record, stemming from a fraud conviction he views as illegitimate. Accordingly, the question now is not about what kind of elections these will be, but what they will mean for Vladimir Putin's fourth term. In other words, what will the Putin 4.0 system look like? What challenges will it face?

### **Putin as a source of stability: the fight for legitimacy**

In response to the government's refusal to register Navalny, the opposition will try to reduce turnout; for example, it has organized a series of protests on January 28 in support of a boycott of the elections. Meanwhile, the government will likely seek to portray this effort as destabilizing, emphasizing that Putin's candidacy is fully legitimate and that the election is being held in complete accordance with democratic procedures.

Putin's campaign does not need to fear the competition; according to Levada Centre polls, nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy will collect about four percent of the votes. Meanwhile, Ksenia Sobchak, a nominally liberal candidate, is not widely supported by the liberal opposition and is considered to be a 'show candidate'.<sup>1</sup> Levels of support for the leader of the Yabloko party Grigory Yavlinsky, communist Pavel Grudinin, business ombudsman Boris Titov and other marginal candidates are even smaller. By contrast, Navalny's candidacy would have received even more media attention, strengthening his viability as an alternative to Putin. The

regime has sought to delegitimize Navalny, depicting him as an irresponsible radical, even while it avoids mentioning him by name. Yet, had his candidacy not been banned, as the main opponent of Vladimir Putin Navalny could have united the opposition behind him, gaining the attention of a wider audience while cementing his reputation as the best future alternative to the current president.

The upcoming presidential elections in Russia are not real elections. This farcical ritual of ensuring the continuity and legitimacy of Vladimir Putin's rule helps to portray Putin as essential to ensuring the country's stability. However, the government has the basic tools (control of the media, electoral system, "administrative resources," and so on) to ensure Putin's continued popularity while assuring itself a veneer of legitimacy—in which the security services play a disproportionate role. In 2012-2014, public support for Putin actually fell, and anti-Putin forces represented a serious challenge to the president. However, Putin's popularity soared after Russia's actions in Ukraine in 2014. In addition to external threats, the current government also finds it useful to have mystical 'internal enemies'—who purportedly seek to undermine the country's stability. Relying on the secret services, Russian authorities accordingly have developed and maintained a narrative about 'internal enemies' that act to advance unspecified foreign interests—rhetoric drawn directly from the official discourse of the USSR. During an interview in December 2017, FSB chairman Aleksandr Bortnikov spoke about the beneficial role played by security services of Russia and the USSR, emphasizing that historically some of these foreign forces have sought—and continue to seek—not only to weaken Russia

<sup>1</sup> Леонид Гозман, "Три процента против всех: Почему я не буду голосовать за Собчак", *Новая газета*, 8 января 2018.

<https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/01/08/75083-tri-protiv-vseh>

openly, but to act subversively through 'traitors' who allow them to stir up rebellion, demoralize society, and paralyze the government's ability to respond effectively to emerging threats.<sup>2</sup>

Bortnikov implies that at the fall of the USSR, the ruling party failed to pay sufficient attention to the KGB's warnings about the growing conflicts; accordingly, not only did the USSR collapse because the security services were undervalued, but its successor state Russia was thrown into crisis. It was only with the help of Putin that the role of security services was strengthened, both in terms of assigning them greater responsibility in responding to emerging threats as well as in promoting dialogue between the security services and the public. The legitimacy of Putin (who after all came out of the top level of the Soviet security services), according to analysts from the Warsaw Institute, is also important to the preservation of the security services' networks of influence<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, many prominent Russian academics and intellectuals reject particular Bortnikov's exaggerated and distorted account of history, which overlooks aspects such as the decisions of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which condemned Stalinist repression. For example, according to historian and *Memorial* representative Nikita Petrov—Bortnikov overestimates the links of Soviet-era actors with hostile foreign services while he avoids any mention of innocent victims<sup>4</sup>.

Given that his regime sprang from and remains closely tied with the security services, in order to serve as a truly stabilizing force Putin will have to manoeuvre between the security services as one of the main guarantors of public order, while at the same time distancing himself from the justification of totalitarian crimes. It can be noted that the 'internal enemies' narrative has been quite successful in limiting public support for certain opposition leaders, such as Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Vladimir V. Kara-Murza, or Garry Kasparov, but is not entirely suited for discrediting Alexei Navalny.

In contrast to other opposition figures, Navalny deliberately strives to distance himself from Western support, or indeed from notably ideological rhetoric, while exploiting mistakes made by the government to develop greater support for his fight against corruption. Nevertheless, the current system is still capable of withstanding this confrontation without completely restricting freedom of speech and without brutal repression (even if the protests attract thousands). With its still considerable—albeit fuelled by state

media—levels of public support, the regime has been able to neutralize those inclined to favour the protesters in general and Navalny in particular; nevertheless, he is still considered the only person that could revolutionize thinking in Russian society—at least under the right conditions.

### Readiness to maintain the current system

The current regime's ideology is Putinism, which can be described as a combination of conservatism, populism, and personalism<sup>5</sup>. Russian conservatism supports the idea that the country's civilisation is strong and distinctive, rejects some Western standards as harmful, and combines elements of ethnic Russian (*russskii*) identity with the cultural and political identity rooted historically in the legacy of the imperial Russian state (*rossiiskii*). The direction of Russian conservatism is being further developed by certain sociologists and political theorists, supported by the Orthodox Church and the security services alike<sup>6</sup>. The second element, populism, involves active use of state media by the regime and emphasizes the impact of external and internal enemies while stressing how Russia is developing successfully despite them. Finally, personalism refers to the personal leadership of Vladimir Putin, in which the informal chain of power networks, essentially duplicating the institutions of the state in a way reminiscent of mafia organizations, one that exists beyond the personal leadership of Putin himself.

Putin's regime relies on creating and exploiting external circumstances in order to overcome internal problems. The 'Crimean consensus' that emerged in 2014 provided Putin with unprecedented public support and allowed him to justify aiding separatist structures in Donetsk and Luhansk. Meanwhile, Russia's activity in Syria has so far been presented as a way for the country to participate in maintaining world order. That activity has also allowed Putin to point to a big achievement for Russia—victory over ISIS.

These actions all the narrative of "Russia no longer on its knees" that has already been buttressed by other "achievements" in past years both in the post-Soviet "near abroad" and elsewhere, as well as by the country's campaign of military modernization. Russia's current foreign and domestic policy remains paradigmatically defined by the events of 2014 in Ukraine. It has shown its ability to be a world power capable of assertively defending its interests anywhere in the world. Russia's National Security Strategy, prepared in 2015, succinctly

<sup>2</sup> ФСБ расставляет акценты, Александр Бортников, «Российская Газета», 19 декабря 2017.  
<http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/comment/rukov/single.htm%21id%3D10438230%40fsbAppearance.html>

<sup>3</sup> FSB or Cheka 2.0 Warsaw Institute special report, January 3, 2018.  
<https://warsawinstitute.org/fsb-cheka-2-0>

<sup>4</sup> «Попытка создать красивую историю госбезопасности провалилась», Историк Никита Петров разбирает программное интервью директора ФСБ Александра Бортникова.

<https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/12/30/75069-arhaika-i-pravovoy-nigilizm>

<sup>5</sup> *Journal of Democracy*, October 2017 Issue: What is Putinism?  
<https://www.ned.org/journal-of-democracy-october-2017-issue-what-is-putinism/>

<sup>6</sup> Vilius Ivanauskas, „Rusiškasis konservatyvizmas: nacionalinės ideologijos paieška ir santykis su Rusijos užsienio politika,“ *Rusijos raidos scenarijai: implikacijos Lietuvos ir regiono saugumui*, Vilnius, 2016, pp. 54-91.

presents its establishment's worldview on foreign policy. In the document, Russia asserts its ability successfully to defend its own sovereignty, protect the rights of compatriots abroad, engage in global solutions, return to traditional values, play an increasingly important role in using resources in the Pacific and Arctic regions, interprets NATO as a serious threat to its territorial integrity, and deems the 2014 events in Kyiv to be an 'unconstitutional coup' that was 'sponsored by the US and the EU, which seek to influence Ukrainians to see Russia as a threat'<sup>7</sup>.

Russia has also increasingly been escalating its hostility to the United States, as it actively seeks to exploit any loophole to reduce US power. In response to the recent US National Security Strategy, in which Russia is named as a revisionist authoritarian power seeking to challenge the United States, Secretary of the Security Council of Russia (and former FSB director) Nikolai Patrushev argued that American foreign policy is characterized by irresponsible behaviour both in general (for example, its recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, or its provoking North Korea) and in particular towards Russia, with which the US has been expansionist and unjustifiably aggressive, even though Russia has historically contributed to the liberation of many nations<sup>8</sup>.

According to Patrushev, by allocating \$4.6 billion (€3.7 billion) to the defence of Europe in general—including \$100 million (€80 million) to the Baltic states, and \$350 million (€280 million) to Ukraine—in an effort to eliminate Russia's aggression in Europe', the US is risking unpredictable consequences. American hostility to Russia and Russia's confrontational behaviour could well escalate conflict between the two sides to the level of a new Cold War in the years to come. However, EU member states have a choice: they can either continue to support the United States or, due to dissatisfaction with the unilateral policies of the US, seek instead to pursue engagement with Russia.

Although at the international level Russia will continue to come under considerable diplomatic pressure, the main means of influencing the regime are economic measures. So far Western sanctions have not achieved the desired effect: Russia's economy is in a better position than expected. In 2017, the country's economic growth was about 2%. In opinion polls—which may be inaccurate—a majority (78%) of Russians report that they are happy with their economic situation<sup>9</sup>. This statistic has been widely reported in Russian media to argue that the Western sanctions did not undermine the country's economic and social development.

After the Zapad 2017 exercise, Putin announced that all public and private companies should be ready to produce defence-related products. In one sense, this move can be considered as a means of domestic political mobilization in the run-up to the elections—part of the broader narrative that by staying in power, Putin is effectively protecting the country against external threats—the ongoing modernization of the Russian military underscores that militarization can be one of the dominant elements in the Putin 4.0 system. If completed as planned by 2020, this modernization campaign means that Russia will seek to become even more active in world hotspots, both in promoting Putin's vision of a multipolar world while signalling new military aggression in the 'near abroad' especially if the regime requires new public support.

However, Russian journalist Konstantin von Eggert emphasizes that in pursuing its foreign policy Putin 4.0 will face three challenges - economic, external and psychological. According to von Eggert, as a result of its costly foreign policy (war in Ukraine, intervention in Syria, maintaining frozen conflicts elsewhere on its periphery, etc.). However, under Putin 4.0, a shortage of funds may force Russia to reconsider its foreign policy priorities, especially expensive projects such as Nord Stream 2, or failed efforts such as lobbying in Western capitals for the lifting of Western sanctions, or a return to 'business as usual' might combine to push Russia towards greater international isolation. Meanwhile, the psychological factor is also significant—since over time people grow tired of the same regime, the Kremlin must constantly become more creative in "selling" its propaganda to the public.

One of the biggest remaining questions is whether Russia will be capable of wider re-engagement with the domestic public and of effectively implementing a programme of economic modernization during Putin's fourth term. The latter is especially significant, given that experts believe that economic reforms are needed if the country is to avoid entering a recession in the next few years<sup>10</sup>. Unfortunately, according to the current consensus, the Putin-Medvedev tandem is at best capable of implementing only partial reforms<sup>11</sup>. Since, in the future Russia could face a decline in oil prices, more pronounced negative effects of Western sanctions, and attendant effects such as increased corruption or socioeconomic vulnerability—thereby making reforms even more necessary. It is likely that in this event, Putin would sacrifice Medvedev and install next-generation economists in government.

<sup>7</sup> Стратегия национальной безопасности Российской Федерации (утв.). <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/security/docs/document133/>

<sup>8</sup> Ответы Секретаря Совета Безопасности Российской Федерации Николая Патрушева на вопросы главного редактора «АИФ» Игоря Черняка о проблемах международной безопасности и борьбе с террористической угрозой в РФ, <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/news/allnews/2340/>

<sup>9</sup> Опрос: россияне довольны жизнью, но готовятся к тяжелым временам, 16 октября 2017, <https://iz.ru/659093/2017-10-16/opros-rossiiane-dovolny-zhizniu-no-gotoviatsia-k-tiazhelym-vremenam>

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Rogoff, "Russia's future looks bleak without economic and political reform", *The Guardian*, July 5, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Елена Теслова, Путин 4.0: Реформы или застой. <https://newtimes.ru/articles/detail/133840>

Yet, even in these circumstances, no radical institutional reforms would be implemented, as such reforms would be too risky for the survival of the regime. However, in responding to the protests of Navalny's supporters, the current government could put more emphasis on anti-corruption measures, as well to pension reforms and similar actions. The main problem that Russia now faces is that its institutions—beginning with parliament—are merely a façade, behind which various mafia-like clans struggle for powers, supported by the security services. This problem will likely remain both hidden and unresolved. Given that the regime has escalated its use of the 'internal enemies' narrative, and is now taking actions against the colleagues and websites of Navalny and initiative "Open Russia", Russian Human Rights Council member Pavel Chikov predicts that the Putin 4.0 regime will rely on 'Russian conservatism' to restrict human rights even further, take control of the internet, limit other religious groups (supporting Orthodox church), reduce access to foreign media, and perhaps even leave the Council of Europe and the European Court of Human Rights<sup>12</sup>.

### Succession Question

There have been many attempts to describe and characterize the Putin regime, from electoral authoritarianism to hybrid regime or mafia state. Its internal structure may be a 'black box', but one thing is certain: it involves disproportionately large numbers of people associated with the security services, especially from the FSB—such as the aforementioned Patrushev and Bortnikov as well as 'grey cardinal' Igor Sechin. Compared to its previous iterations, however, the Putin 4.0 period will feature even more debate about the question of succession. During the next few years, the Putin 4.0 regime will have to choose the future leader of the country—and will most likely choose someone with close ties to the security services. Moreover, given the relatively advanced age of both Bortnikov and Patrushev (who were born in 1951), it is likely that they will be replaced with new figures as well.

While one can expect a struggle for succession to take place among the clans surrounding Putin, the president himself will have the last word in choosing his replacement. Even if Sechin has emerged conditionally victorious in his struggle with former economy minister Alexey Ulyukayev, Putin will still be able to maintain the upper hand. The competition among the various security services is only increasing. The creation of a "presidential" National Guard and the growing influence of its head Viktor Zolotov<sup>13</sup> poses a direct challenge to the FSB. In response, the latter organization has begun to intensify its activity in domains such as (fighting against corruption, terrorism, and radicalism).

Moreover, the authority of new FSB leaders such as Sergei Korolev and Sergey Alpatov is growing relative to that of alongside the influence of security leaders Patrushev and Bortnikov. Uncertainty about the succession process is adding so much stress to power networks that we may see a return to real negotiations and meaningful politics to the Russian political stage during the Putin 4.0 era. At the very least, we should soon see mafia-style power clans begin identifying some potential candidates for Putin to evaluate personally.

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<sup>12</sup> Alexei Obukhov, "Russia's Bright Future (Putin 4.0): Member of HRC Describes Putin's New Term: Everything under the Sun Will Be Banned", October 10, 2017. <https://therussianreader.com/2017/10/10/russias-bright-future-putin-4-0/>

<sup>13</sup> "FSB or Cheka 2.0", Warsaw Institute.