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# REGIME CHANGE IN RUSSIA

Kadri Liik

## SUMMARY

A year into Vladimir Putin's third presidential term, it is evident that the nature of his regime has changed significantly. The "managed democracy" that ruled Russia during the last 12 years – allowing the Kremlin to manipulate the political scene with the consent of the ruled – has ended. Putin's third presidency is forced to rely more upon coercion than co-optation. The new system is harsher and cruder, but also fragile.

Putin once used to have it all: political support from different constituencies, loyalty from the elites, and control over bountiful economic resources. Now, however, both his political support and Russia's economic might are contracting, forcing Putin to choose between different and often mutually exclusive priorities and constituencies. Having it all is no longer possible, and the choices made by Putin now will not only determine the lifespan of his rule, but also have meaningful implications for post-Putin Russia.

The European Union needs a new set of policies to address the new realities of Putin's Russia. But, even more importantly, it needs to be aware of the nature and extent of ongoing changes and prepare for regime change in Russia as best as it can.

A year after Vladimir Putin's return to power as Russia's president, it is clear that the country has been undergoing a fundamental change. The "managed democracy" that ruled Russia during the past 12 years – allowing the Kremlin to manipulate the political scene with the consent of the ruled – has ended. Putin's third presidency is now being forced to rely more upon coercion than co-optation: a shift in style so fundamental that it is possible to talk of Russia undergoing "regime change", keeping Putin at its head but altering the basic principles that underpin his political system.<sup>1</sup> As this new and harsher system is wrought with many internal contradictions that threaten its very sustainability, this may evolve into more literal regime change in the coming years.

This concept of Russian regime change is vital for Europe in its dealings with Putin's Russia, as it requires an understanding of the country's new realities, the devising of a new Russia policy, and preparation for possible further changes on the horizon.

### The end of "managed democracy"

"Managed democracy" was a peculiar system.<sup>2</sup> Its "software" was effectively a large-scale conjuring trick: for 12 years

<sup>1</sup> For the same argument see, for example, Ivan Krastev, "The seven faces of Putin", *Prospect*, 24 April 2013, available at <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/blog/putin-russia-hill-geddy-ivan-krastev/>.

<sup>2</sup> Sometimes people refer to that system also as "sovereign democracy", using a term coined by Vladislav Surkov. However, as the latter concept, on the one hand, is wider, more elaborate, and nuanced, and, on the other hand, can mean different things to different people (see, for example, "Pro Suverenmiy demokratiyu" ("About Sovereign Democracy"), Moscow: Evropa, 2007; or Vladislav Surkov, "Teksty 97-07" ("Texts 97-07"), Moscow: Evropa, 2008), it seems wiser to stick to the simpler and clearer "managed democracy".

Russian politics was an illusionary, imitational system, where the political landscape, media, public discussions, and what passed for ideology were all staged and manipulated from above by the Kremlin's spin doctors. This arrangement allowed political parties to be created and destroyed at whim; elections to be fixed with the consent of the electorate and without massive falsifications; and the media to be manipulated without outright censorship. Artificial discussions were ignited while real ones were extinguished, and government-organised "non-governmental organisations" were created to marginalise the proper NGOs. The population, tired of the uncertainty of the 1990s, was happy to accept this performance. The apex of this system of "virtual politics" was encapsulated by Aleksandr Dugin, a nationalist Russian thinker and Putin supporter, who noted that "everything was extraordinarily effective, but at the same time completely meaningless. And meaninglessness, having acquired gigantic proportions, became threatening."<sup>3</sup>

Underpinning this "software" was the "hardware" of objective realities. Oil and gas prices rose steadily during Putin's first two terms, allowing a steady improvement in living standards. The memory of the poverty-stricken and chaotic 1990s also contributed to a popular willingness to trade political freedoms for a regular and increasing income.

To extend the analogy, the figure of Putin has been the "operating system" that tied the "software" and "hardware" of "managed democracy" together, allowing it to function. This was underpinned by Putin's high level of popularity, which he then bestowed upon artificially created political parties, allowing him to gain control of parliament. His popularity undercut all serious challengers to his rule and gave him the authority to play the role of arbiter between different political clans. Critical television channels lost their financiers to exile and their audience to the pro-Putin messages, slashing demand for critical views and pushing liberal opinion to the margins. Putin's application of apparently contradictory or incompatible policies – for instance, liberal economic reforms coupled with the restoration of Soviet symbolism – allowed him to associate with very different groups in society, who then lent him their support as somebody who championed at least part of their agenda.

## The magic fades

The cracks in the "managed democracy" system began with a decline in Putin's popularity. Although pinning down the exact time that this began is difficult, the announcement of his comeback, in September 2011, exposed the extent of its erosion.<sup>4</sup> Putin remains Russia's best-supported politician,

<sup>3</sup> See Aleksandr Dugin, "Good bye, golden boy. Pervye mysli ob uhode Surkova" ("Good bye, golden boy. First thoughts about Surkov's departure"), *Evrasia.org*, 30 December 2011, available at <http://evrazia.org/article/1876>.

<sup>4</sup> The exact numbers can differ depending on the polling agency and the methodology used. According to the independent Levada Center, for example, Putin's approval rating has fallen from a high of 78 percent in 2008 to around 30 percent now. See <http://www.levada.ru/29-01-2013/sotsiolog-lev-gudkov-ob-obshchestvennykh-tendentsiyakh-2013-g-v-rossii>.

although only 28 percent of respondents in a recent poll said they would vote for him again; more than 50 percent, including many who otherwise remain loyal to Putin, do not want him to continue in office beyond the expiration of his third term in 2018.<sup>5</sup>

Changes in the nature of his support are more important still, with a notable decline in the number of people who associate Putin with optimism for the future. Instead, those that support him tend to do so because of the lack of credible alternatives (itself a consequence of the hollowing-out of Russian politics under "managed democracy"). Recent studies also suggest that Putin's popularity is becoming more closely linked to the reputation of the governmental system as a whole, whereas previously it was correlated with perceptions of popular economic well-being rather than an evaluation of political performance (a system sometimes referred to as "delegative democracy").<sup>6</sup>

The experience of the 1990s is increasingly less valid as a reference point for people's lives. Instead, Russians are now more likely to incorporate their expectations for the future, which they often associate with uncertainty. Time and generational change is also eroding empathy with another of Putin's reference points – the late Soviet era. Without direct memories of the Soviet Union, younger Russians simply do not relate to Putin's allusions to Soviet realities.

Putin, who once used to have at least the partial support of all major societal groups and incorporated elements of everyone's agenda into his rhetoric, has now clearly lost the urban intellectual class. Within this grouping a core constituency has emerged that is ready to take to the streets in protest.<sup>7</sup> As a counterweight, Putin is trying to mobilise his power base in the provincial majority, but they are also unhappy: although they worry less about political freedoms, the failings of the system – corruption, faltering or inaccessible basic services, and inadequate healthcare and education – are felt by them acutely.

## "Hardware" errors

The situation is made more fragile by economic challenges. Economic growth, which underpinned Putin's power, is slowing. In the first quarter of 2012 it was 4.8 percent; it had fallen to 2.1 percent by the last quarter of that year and to 1.1 percent in the first quarter of 2013.<sup>8</sup>

For decades, Russia's economy has depended upon the oil price, and Putin was lucky to find himself blessed by a decade-long rise. The perils of dependency were exposed during the crisis of 2009 which Russia survived in large part thanks to the hefty cash reserves it had built up over the preceding ten fat years.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.levada.ru/25-02-2013/lev-gudkov-lyudi-vosprinimayut-korruptsionnye-skandaly-kak-priznak-polnogo-razlozheniya-vlasti>.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Samuel Greene, "Posle Bolotnoi: novaya norma v publichnoi politike" (After Bolotnaya: new norms in public politics), *Pro et Contra*, No 4–5 2012, pp. 54–83.

<sup>7</sup> According to an independent count, a little less than 25,000 people attended the protest meetings on 6 May 2013.

<sup>8</sup> See Putin's remarks in Sochi on 22 April 2013, available at <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/17947>.

The current slowdown, however, seems to have domestic rather than international roots. The Russian economy is working at full capacity: there is little real unemployment but both domestic demand and supply are falling. Corruption, fears of renationalisation and political interference, and an exodus of capital are contributing factors. In the five months up to April 2013 alone, the number of registered individual entrepreneurs declined by a staggering 367,000.<sup>9</sup> “Inefficient state corporations buy more efficient oligarchic companies, which buy successful medium-sized enterprises. This is no way to run an economy,” says the Peterson Institute’s economist Anders Åslund.<sup>10</sup>

The global shale gas and liquefied natural gas revolution is quickly eroding the once unassailable position of Gazprom in the world markets: it recently declared a fall in profits for the first time since 2001.<sup>11</sup> The impact of this on Russia’s state budget has yet to be felt, but is likely to be substantial. As Gazprom’s balance sheet has functioned as the government’s wallet and social safety valve, this is a grave concern to Putin. Oil prices – which are currently stable at around \$100 a barrel – are unlikely to offer much solace.

The response to these challenges is as yet unclear. Those economists who advocate fiscal or monetary stimulus are at odds with Putin’s traditional, conviction-based adherence to fiscal conservatism. Given the high levels of employment, such a stimulus also runs the risk of translating directly into inflation. However, tackling the structural problems that beset the Russian economy would challenge the foundations of Putin’s rule. Addressing corruption and allowing independent courts would undermine the Kremlin’s control of the justice system and the so-called elite contract that promised the opportunity to get rich in exchange for political loyalty. A knowledge-based rather than extractive economy would also require investment in education and other social services, a reduction in red tape, and an accommodation with the educated urban middle classes that provide the driving force behind any such economy. The latter is especially hard to imagine without political liberalisation.

The spluttering economy may mean that Putin’s contract with Russian society – political loyalty and passivity in exchange for rising living standards – risks being violated by both sides. Not only has Putin’s ability to guarantee further rises in welfare come under doubt, but also a part of the population has decided that welfare is not an adequate price for their loyalty in any case; others consider welfare gains to be insufficient in the face of corruption and the failure of basic service provision.

<sup>9</sup> See Anders Åslund, “Putin’s State Capitalism Means Falling Growth”, *The Moscow Times*, 22 May 2013, available at <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/putins-state-capitalism-means-falling-growth/480301.html> (hereafter, Åslund, “Putin’s State Capitalism Means Falling Growth”).

<sup>10</sup> Åslund, “Putin’s State Capitalism Means Falling Growth”.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Bierman, “Gazprom 2012 Profit Drops 9.5% on Decline in Natural Gas Demand”, *Bloomberg*, 30 April 2013, available at <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-04-30/gazprom-2012-profit-drops-9-5-on-decline-in-natural-gas-demand.html>.

## A divided and diverse opposition

Despite the increasingly fertile ground for both political and economic dissatisfaction, Russia’s opposition has so far failed to capitalise on it, for several reasons. Firstly, popular discontent has not been in sync with the electoral cycle. The protest constituency manifested itself only after the State Duma elections of December 2011, which was too late to get organised for the presidential elections of the following March by registering a common candidate with a strong message.

Secondly, the opposition is divided and diverse. Agreeing on a proper message and strategy, let alone a candidate, is a challenge. The current so-called non-systemic opposition comes from various parts of the political and societal spectrum, from nationalists to socialists, and from various shades of liberals to simple opportunists. There is little common ground for a “positive” strategy, and a “negative” strategy based simply on their shared opposition to Putin is unlikely to be welcomed by the naturally conservative and wary Russian electorate.

The question of whether revolution or evolution is the best course is one of several cleavages within the opposition. Each ideological camp contains its own radicals and moderates, with radicals from different camps often seeing more in common with each other than with their respective moderate ideological peers.<sup>12</sup> Another cleavage is between those who see the need to demolish the foundations of the entire system, starting with the super-presidential constitution, and those who would simply replace the leaders and retain the basic features of the system.

These splits help explain why the opposition has been unable to address two of the major divisions in Russian society: the rift between Moscow and the provinces; and the balance between the local and practical as opposed to more ideological political agendas. Much of the energy behind the opposition originates in the provinces. Despite the high profile of the protests in the winter of 2011–2012, when thousands gathered in the streets and squares of Moscow, the peak of street protests was in 2009, in the shape of frequent but uncoordinated actions across the provinces that had their roots in social and economic discontent.<sup>13</sup> Such opposition has its own leaders who rarely link up with the political class in Moscow (who many provincial activists despise). Those in the capital, in turn, have not yet found a way to link their agenda to that of those elsewhere, by demonstrating the links between local ills and the wider political system.

So far, the opposition’s leaders have made use of the protests, but they have not been their driving force. This, plus the deepening crackdown, has added to the wider loss of direction for now. However, if a political entrepreneur

<sup>12</sup> ECFR interview with Alexei Makarkin, analyst with the Center for Political Technologies, 14 December 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Statement by Mikhail Dmitriev at the “Russia, Vladimir Putin and the EU” seminar at the German Parliament, 31 January 2013.

emerges who manages to join the political and economic grievances into a single agenda, he or she would have the potential to mobilise the capital as well as the provinces.

## Putin fights back

Meanwhile, Putin is trying to reassert his power. “He got truly scared in late 2011,” says Vladimir Milov, a former deputy minister and now an opposition leader. “And now he is looking for revenge against all those who scared him: protesters, independent NGOs, and elites whose loyalty is fragile.”<sup>14</sup> Putin is turning back to his experiences from the early 2000s, when he identified the sources of dissent and eliminated them bit by bit, using ostensibly legal methods. But while in the early years of his rule there were centres of opposition (particularly individual oligarchs and the media they controlled), which could be neutralised by such “precision strikes”, the opposition is now wider, deeper, and more dispersed. This has led to the authorities taking a “carpet bombing” approach, with almost anyone active in the opposition liable to be arrested or labelled as a “foreign agent.” Independent civil society institutions have found themselves under unprecedented attack, and many assume that they will eventually have to close.

Still, this is a case of shooting the messenger rather than addressing the problem. Unlike in Putin’s early presidency, the root causes of dissatisfaction are shared across Russian society, and addressing them would undercut Putin’s rule. While jailing protest leaders or silencing NGOs may postpone the problems, it will also make society less structured and therefore the situation more dangerous in the end.

There is a further parallel between Putin’s methods now and in the early 2000s. Just as when he dealt with the business elites back then, he is now presenting the political elites with “new rules of the game” that they are expected to follow. Then, the oligarchs had to refrain from political activity and remain attentive to Kremlin requests; current elites are being asked to get rid of foreign bank accounts and declare all real estate and other significant purchases, or leave their jobs.<sup>15</sup> According to Russian analysts, the current anti-corruption campaign is designed to fulfil several functions: (mainly) to ensure the elites’ loyalty by making everyone vulnerable to charges; to facilitate some turnover among the elites, creating space for newcomers; and to hijack the anti-corruption agenda of the opposition.<sup>16</sup> But this means that the elites are losing positive incentives to remain loyal to the regime; and their servility is increasingly based on fear and lack of alternatives – not a sustainable long-term strategy.

Bit by bit, the contours of Putin’s new regime are emerging, portraying not a “managed democracy” that co-opts elites and coaxes voters into supporting the regime with a merry-go-round political system and artificial parties, but a crude

system that relies on more or less implicit threats, blackmail, and control. Putin’s system is losing its carrots and survives by pointing to – and increasingly using – its sticks.

## Putin’s foreign policy

The impact of these domestic challenges on Putin’s foreign policy is a key concern for the European Union. When Putin first came to power, his foreign policy was remarkably Western-friendly: he chose not to pick a fight over the second round of NATO enlargement to the east; he echoed concerns over terrorism following the attacks on the United States in 2001; and he looked for ways to co-operate with European countries, especially Germany.

In subsequent years, this Western-friendly approach faded: the West’s economic problems after 2008 made it a less attractive partner; the doctrine of liberal interventionism goes against Putin’s cherished vision of international order; and the on-and-off courtship of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova by the EU and NATO was seen by Putin as a severe infringement of what he considers to be Russia’s privileged sphere of interests. The main reason why Putin’s attitudes towards and relationship with the West has disappointed, however, may be summed up by the American Russia-watcher Robert Nurick: “Putin must have realised that “going West” cannot be a foreign policy project; it is bound to be a domestic project.”<sup>17</sup>

However much Western leaders tried to paper over the cracks, Russia’s failure to apply what the West considers basic standards of democratic political behaviour has created tensions in the relationship. Although the toughest exchanges have tended to be between Moscow and Washington, Europe has been more exposed to friction thanks to its own normative culture, its proximity to Russia, and the multiplicity of mutual ties. While the US could in theory confine its dialogue with Moscow to strategic issues, ignoring normative issues, the EU does not have that luxury.

With Putin responding to the new challenges that he faces domestically with a further retreat from Western normative standards, this relationship could become yet more troubled. Putin’s reliance on traditionalist and conservative groups within Russia could also shape a more aggressive foreign policy rhetoric, resulting in propagandistic anti-Western statements and exchanges. At the same time, Russia is not in a position to pose a proper challenge to the West and Moscow knows it – as its unwillingness to use the recent Cyprus crisis for its geopolitical benefit indirectly confirms. The Russia of Putin’s third term is a long way from the position of strength that the president enjoyed during his second term, in 2004 to 2008. With the era of “managed democracy” replaced by a fragile political balance, “managed standoffs” may also pose an additional risk to Putin domestically.

<sup>14</sup> ECFR interview with Vladimir Milov, 27 April 2013.

<sup>15</sup> See remarks by Sergei Ivanov, head of the presidential administration, at the Kremlin on 2 April 2013, available at <http://state.kremlin.ru/face/17785>.

<sup>16</sup> See Nikolai Petrov, “Stalin-lait ili stalinizatsiya putinizma. Politicheskaya shizofreniya epohi poznegogo putinizma” (“Stalin-light or the Stalinisation of Putinism. Political schizophrenia of late Putinism”), *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 18 March 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Author’s conversation with Robert Nurick, 1 May 2013.



The result of these pressures is likely to be a Russian foreign policy that is relatively reactive and passive, and sometimes even moderately co-operative, but focused upon defending its own priorities: the security of the regime (questioning its legitimacy will be met with reprimands); a state-centric international order; competition with the West for influence over the key countries of the post-Soviet space; and Russia's economic interests.

## Russia and the EU

For the countries of the EU, Russia has been a deeply divisive subject for years. Not only has there been division over policies towards Moscow – with some advocating engagement while others push for containment – but also their basic analyses of the situation have varied a great deal. Now, as shown by ECFR's *European Foreign Policy Scorecard 2013*, the EU has largely developed a common understanding of Russia, but lacks good ideas when it comes to policy (especially regarding the crackdown on political freedoms).<sup>18</sup>

The EU has a limited range of options to influence Moscow over Russia's deteriorating human rights conditions, but some exist. To begin with, the European External Action Service and individual member states' diplomatic missions must combine resources and manpower to ensure representation at all important political court cases, such as the trial of opposition leader Alexei Navalny. This is taking place in Kirov, 1,000 kilometres from Moscow, and outside the normal operating areas of Western diplomats. The EU also needs to consider what its reaction would be should Navalny (or other opposition leaders) be jailed. Will they simply issue a condemnatory statement, or will they modify their relations with the Kremlin in a more concrete way? If the EU talks of sanctions or "red lines", these will need to be adhered to.

Secondly, the EU needs to reconsider how it supports civil society, which is coming under pressure for where it has foreign funding. The efforts of different member states need to be co-ordinated, although pooling efforts may not be advisable, as certain member states have advantages in access that need to be utilised.

Thirdly, funding increases for Russian NGOs need to be considered. Although the NGOs themselves are divided over the wisdom of accepting foreign financial assistance in the current climate, survival – even with the stigma of being labelled a "foreign agent" – is preferable to closure.

Fourthly, the EU simply needs to keep an eye on the changing political landscape. As the protest constituency refuses to be defined by any political leaders, understanding the direction the opposition might push Russia in is difficult to distil from meetings with the leaders. Instead, European diplomats should look to the example of the Soviet Union, when the

non-systemic opposition was joined by moderate or liberal elements from within the power system and independent but state-tolerated intelligentsia. European policymakers must get close to the protest constituency itself, both in Moscow and beyond, but also to the disaffected elites.

The largest carrot Europe holds in its relations with Moscow is the possibility of visa-free travel to the EU. The main question is how this carrot can be linked to other issues. While linking visa-free travel to unrelated issues (for instance, co-operation on Syria) may be difficult and complex, the EU should not hesitate to link it to the bundle of issues that concern people's movement. This includes Russia's planned new rules on air passenger data that could force the EU to choose between contradicting its own laws or leaving its airlines open to penalties that could extend to planes being grounded.<sup>19</sup> The EU could also use visa-free travel to push for a stricter interpretation of the rule of law, which would in turn help address concerns over political freedoms.

The EU needs to consider prioritising democratic development in Russia's neighbours, especially the Eastern Partnership countries (although these countries can themselves make the process difficult and frustrating). It should also try to lock Russia into law-based arrangements such as the World Trade Organization, and Brussels should not hesitate to use all the means it has available to encourage Russia to comply with the rules it has subscribed to.

Further afield, Russia shares many of the West's concerns about the Middle East slipping out of control, particularly given its vulnerabilities under the current Putin presidency. This means, for instance, that Moscow may respond favourably to the offer of contributing to a realistic settlement in Syria that is not at odds with its guiding foreign policy principles. But, as Russia and Russian democracy are important in themselves for Europe, EU member states must resist the temptation to bargain domestic carte blanche for Moscow's co-operation on Syria or Iran. Instead, the EU should aspire to create conditions on particular issues that appeal to Russia's pragmatic interests.

The most effective policies the EU can have towards Russia are less to do with Russia than the European Union itself. It must do its homework on energy security and anti-corruption initiatives, working on diversifying energy supply routes, creating a common energy market, addressing anti-monopoly issues, and being firm on corruption. This would make EU member states less vulnerable to Moscow's attempts to divide-and-rule, while setting significant restraints on Putin's freedom of manoeuvre at home.

There are also several things that the EU must refrain from doing, such as appearing indecisive, uncertain, and disunited on particular policies. For instance, the EU at first refused to grant visa-free travel to holders of Russian

<sup>18</sup> See *European Foreign Policy Scorecard 2013*, European Council on Foreign Relations, February 2013, available at <http://www.ecfr.eu/scorecard/2013>.

<sup>19</sup> Cathy Buyck, "EU, Russia in Stalemate On Siberian Overflight Fees", *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, 1 April 2013, available at [http://www.aviationweek.com/Article.aspx?id=/article-xml/AW\\_04\\_01\\_2013\\_p32-563613.xml&p=2](http://www.aviationweek.com/Article.aspx?id=/article-xml/AW_04_01_2013_p32-563613.xml&p=2).

“service” passports (such as members of the military or civil service), before seeming to relent (at Germany’s initiative), and then once more backtracking.<sup>20</sup> Such behaviour undermines European credibility and encourages Moscow to find “Trojan horses” that erode any common EU positions.

Finally, the EU should not hesitate to develop a less ambitious agenda vis-à-vis Russia, if that avoids the frustrations that accompany a more ambitious one. The bureaucratic instinct to have political deliverables at summits need not always be followed. It may be that taking a strategic pause is the correct way forward at this particular time.<sup>21</sup> This would also give Europe time to understand the real changes happening in Putin’s third presidency, and find more effective ways to deal with regime change in Russia.

## About the author

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<sup>20</sup> Arguably, granting visa-free travel for service passport holders was a bad policy from the beginning, as it effectively would have given the Kremlin the right to decide who got it. The EU should seek to retain that right for itself.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Jana Kobzova, “Time for a strategic pause in EU-Russia relations?”, ECFR, 8 May 2013, available at [http://ecfr.eu/content/entry/commentary\\_eu\\_russia\\_relations\\_time\\_for\\_a\\_strategic\\_pause130](http://ecfr.eu/content/entry/commentary_eu_russia_relations_time_for_a_strategic_pause130).

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