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Russia after Putin

Will the eventual departure of Vladimir Putin lead to a transformation in Russia's political culture? Neil Thompson doesn't think so. That's because the Russian President has created a 'deep state' that self-aggrandizing political elites will want to preserve.

By Neil Thompson for ISN

Russia is teetering on the brink of a social and economic crisis. An unexpected fall in oil and gas prices has pushed the Russian economy deeper into recession and the cost of absorbing the Crimean peninsula and Western sanctions has prompted informal currency controls in a bid [prop up](#) the rouble. A return to the dark days of the 1998 default and devaluation crisis suddenly seems possible. Such a situation would make things extremely difficult for Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has built a domestic reputation as a competent economic manager and a strong nationalist.

Economic problems at home complicate Putin's foreign policy outlook. Since he came to power fifteen years ago on a wave of popular disgust at the excesses of the oligarchs - Russia's post-Soviet business class - Putin has regarded his country's 'near abroad' as off limits to outside influences. In geopolitical terms, this has come to mean the former western republics of the Soviet Union (minus the Baltic States), a region where Moscow's strategic interests clash with those of the United States and European Union (EU).

That said, it has been Putin's quest to protect Russia's sphere of influence over its near-abroad which has done much to undermine his hard-won control over domestic affairs. Instead of concentrating on modernizing Russia's ageing infrastructure and technology base, or diversifying its economy away from energy exports, Moscow has instead focused on rebuilding Russian prestige overseas. In doing so, Putin has undoubtedly succeeded in reasserting Russia's hard power in the short term, but probably at the cost of its long-term economic strength. Since the Russian people care more about living standards and corruption than foreign adventures this has also harmed Putin's long-term political survival. Which begs the question: what kind of government would follow the Russian President's departure?

Putinism 2.0?

It's a difficult question to answer, given that Putin has cemented his status as the dominant figure in Russian politics since reassuming the Presidency in May 2012. The virtual elimination of influential political opposition parties and independent media inside the country has concentrated power in the hands of the Russian President and a narrow ruling clique drawn from his days in St Petersburg. Putin's genuine electoral popularity has also been supplemented by vote-rigging and the harassment

of political opponents, such as the former Yukos oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky and anti-Kremlin activist Alexei Navalny. As a result, Russia has been plummeting down the [Freedom House](#) rankings for over a decade. Currently, the organization [gives Russia](#) a '6' for political rights and '5.5' for freedom in a ranking system with '7' as the worst result.

However, it would be wrong to say that Putin has supplemented his power with an institutionalized and hegemonic political party, as happened in Malaysia with the Barisan Nasional Party. Instead, Putin's 'vertical-power' structure operates as a personalised top-down system of reward-and-punishment. The political parties that have thrived in this environment have tended to be personality-based and [interchangeable](#). For instance, when Putin's personal popularity was at its highest in the 2000s, Duma parties won support with the Russian electorate by seeking his endorsement. Should Putin fall now, it's unlikely that his successor would inherit a political vehicle of any significance, and would probably have to build a federal powerbase from scratch.

Yet, it is also the personalized nature of Putin's authoritarianism that analysts have long pointed too as the Russian president's Achilles' heel. By concentrating power within himself Putin cannot deflect blame for Russia's deteriorating economic conditions and the role that his foreign policies have played in bringing about this situation. Paradoxically, it also means that Putin can be painted as the source of Russia's dysfunctional political culture. This matters because Putin's trump card has never been his popular support: it has been his influence within Russia's security and intelligence structures. This community, and its former members, are now active in business, politics and transnational crime and form the real bedrock of Russia's governing class - the 'deep state' that exists behind the façade of elections.

Russia's 'Deep State'

The term 'deep state' originally comes from Turkish politics and was used to describe the hidden influence on political life in Turkey that was exerted by circles inside the country's intelligence, military and judicial institutions. Their ideology was generally secular, nationalist and conservative and Turkish civilian governments had to work within the boundaries laid down by them. As late as 1997, before the current Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan defanged the army, a government deemed too Islamist was dissolved in a so-called 'judicial coup'. The present Turkish constitution still largely dates from another period of military government.

The idea of the 'deep' state adequately describes the evolution of Russia's post-Soviet elite, first under Yeltsin and then under Putin. When the Soviet Union fell, the same could hardly be of its security apparatus. Instead, the KGB and other security branches were rebranded - but not reformed - by the Yeltsin administration after the supervisory Communist Party structures which had acted as their counterweight were dissolved. At that time, Russia's domestic politics was dominated by the oligarchs, a group that made its money in a series of dubious privatization deals with parts of the Russian bureaucracy.

The disappearance of the Communist Party and the disastrous effects the oligarchs had on Russia's living standards allowed the security services to stage a political comeback. As Yeltsin's health began to deteriorate he searched for a successor who could protect him from his political enemies after he retired. He found Putin, the candidate he was looking for, in the ranks of former Soviet security services veterans known as the 'siloviki' ('power guys'). Putin had only joined the Yeltsin administration in 1996, yet three years later he was Prime Minister of Russia. His rapid promotion was partly based on his promise to protect Yeltsin in retirement, and his ability to fulfil it was based on his close ties to the 'structures of force', as the intelligence, military and police organisations are known as in Russia.

Today the Russian deep state elite are homogenous, acquisitive and secure. In 2009, the Cato Institute calculated that 77% of Russian politicians in the top 1016 federal posts had a security-forces back ground. The extent of their continuing influence can also be measured by their vast illicit wealth. Transparency International recently gave Russia a ranking of 27 (out of one hundred) for perceptions of corruption, one point lower than in 2013 and 2012. That placed Russia at 136th in the international table, alongside Nigeria. Russia is an even worse place to do business than the likes of Pakistan (126th), Algeria (100th), Egypt (94th) and Thailand (85th) - states where the military and intelligence services also have a disproportionate amount of power over policy.

Just as in Egypt, where the fall of Hosni Mubarak eventually led to the return of rule by military strongmen, the fall of Putin would not by itself destroy the influence of Russia's siloviki. In 2012, a year which saw large anti-Putin protests in Moscow, nearly 60% of respondents to a [Pew Research survey](#) believed that a strong leader is better than a democratic government at meeting Russia's national challenges. When asked by the same survey to choose between a fully-functioning democracy and a strong economy, three-quarters of the respondents picked the second option. Putin's 'soft' authoritarian regime, and its veneer of democracy, seems to be a popular political model among ordinary Russians.

The Blind-Alley of Electoral Strongmen

There have already been two successful transfers of power under authoritarian circumstances in Russia's post-Soviet history: from Boris Yeltsin to Vladimir Putin in 2000 and between Putin and Dmitry Medvedev (and back again) in 2008 and 2012. There is no reason to suppose that another Russian leader cannot repeat Putin's trick of posing as a nationalist and a champion against a corrupt elite, while working with the federal system to their own ends. There is also reason to suspect that the alternative to the current Russian leadership system might be [even worse](#).

Putin applied the brakes to Russia's dizzying socio-political failure in the late 1990s. But instead of using the space granted to reform Russia's political economy, he developed his doctrine of implementing an informal protectorate over former Soviet territories. Russia's unreformed economy remains energy-dominated, and thus a style of capitalism tied to the state. Its biggest companies will therefore continue to seek close ties to bureaucrats to prosper, meaning that corruption and an extractive, rentier mind-set will continue to characterize the post-Soviet business elite. The presence of the siloviki, now spread throughout Russian business and politics, guarantees the continued presence of a murky deep state dominated by reactionary, militaristic and nationalist worldviews. The strength of such a system is that it is so widespread it can survive the fall of any individual leader, even the one who created it. Look for more provocative Russian actions in 2015, with or without Vladimir Putin.

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