
Putin’s next six-year term “legitimisation” policy

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Abstract

This report examines the development of the electoral system in Russia, with particular emphasis on the election culture since the establishment of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic to the recent 2018 elections. It analyses changes during six administrations (Lenin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin) and explores the role each have played in moulding the constitutional and legal system in order to gain power and become the leader of their time. The campaign strategies and tactics used during elections are examined in the paper. The report's emphasis goes to the latest president, Vladimir Putin, discussing his controversial role in the media and his political rivals; as well as exploring Russia’s change in the ‘public sphere’ and its relations with the West.

The main question that is being asked is: “why and how” Putin was re-elected for a fourth term, making him the longest serving leader after Joseph Stalin. Russia has always been known to have an undemocratic political structure, however to fully understand it, we must take into consideration its history and its evolution. The past decades have shown that Russian leaders have manipulated the electoral system to ensure maintenance of the status quo by using different campaigns, channels and strategies. This report states that although Russia has undergone many changes to its political system since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the country is still far from being a fully functioning democracy.
Introduction

Russian history is very much a story of revolutions that have left a permanent mark on the contemporary world. The events of February 1917 resulted in the removal of the Tsarist regime and in October of that year, the Bolsheviks overthrew the provisional government and seized power – drastically altering the course of the twentieth century. This paper will attempt to join up some of the dots of Russian history, to trace a line from Lenin to Putin and to understand the nature of its political system and culture of elections.

Today, Russia's government is described as a federal presidential republic. According to the Constitution of the Russian Federation (1993), it is “a democratic federal law-bound State with a republican form of government” and the president is the head of state that enjoys a wide range of powers. On March 18, 2018, Russians had their say on who will be their next president for the fourth term. In accordance with the Constitution, the “President of the Russian Federation will be elected for six years by citizens of the Russian Federation on the basis of universal, equal, direct suffrage by secret ballot.”

Unlike in liberal democracies where election results are often unpredictable, Russia’s case is different. Over the years, Putin’s dominance over the Russian political landscape has grown. According to the country’s constitution, the president can serve another six-year term, allowing Putin to run until 2024. With opinion polls showing confident victory for Vladimir Putin, his term will likely last until he is at least 71 years old.

Despite the vote’s predictable outcome, it is important to recognise the distinctive changes to Russia’s atmosphere and political landscape under Putin’s leadership. The Pussy Riot scandal and anti-Putin protests; the anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny emerging as a new opposition face; the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine, prompting the worst crisis in East-West relations since the end of the Cold War; the EU-US sanctions against Russia; the assassination of Boris Nemtsov, opposition activist and former first deputy prime minister; the launch of Russia’s first airstrikes in Syria in 2015, the death of Kremlin critic Alexander Litvinenko; the US Congress approval of new sanctions for Russia’s alleged meddling in the 2016 presidential election; the new “foreign agent law” allowing the Russian government to designate foreign broadcasters that receive funding from abroad as foreign agents; the International Olympic Committee banning Russia from the 2018 Winter Olympics; the alleged poisoning of former Russian spy in Britain, triggering a serious diplomat crisis between Russia and the West - and many more.

Such crucial events reveal how Russia’s political discourse has dramatically changed since Putin was elected president nearly 18 years ago. Faced with global isolation, economic sanctions and fears of an imminent return of Cold War tensions, the Russian president continues to enjoy widespread popular support at home. Therefore, in order to understand Russia’s Vladimir Putin and his re-election for a fourth term, it is necessary to examine the core features of the political system he has built. Every election carries its unique political (domestic/international) strategies for retaining power and Russian policy is being shaped throughout history accordingly. Therefore this leads us to ask the following questions: how has the Russian electoral system changed since the collapse of the Soviet Era at the end of 1991? How has the system of authoritarianism transformed both domestic and international affairs of Russian politics? And how have Putin’s 2018 presidential elections and its “legitimisation” affected Russia?

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Pre-history/Political System of the Russian Federation

During the Soviet era, the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (R.S.F.S.R) was a sovereign state within a federal structure. Throughout Soviet history, at all levels the government dominated a totalitarian regime by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Only single party candidates - mainly selected by the Communist Party - represented elections that were held. From 1985 to 1990 fundamental changes took place in the political system and in the government of the Soviet Union. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s “Perestroika” (Restructuring), “Glasntost” (Openness) and “Demokratizaciya” (Democratisation) reform policies aimed to end economic stagnation and democratise the government. Within five years, Gorbachev’s foreign policy helped end the Cold War (1945-91) but ultimately led to the dramatic breakdown of the Soviet Empire and, in time, the Soviet Union itself. He had hoped that his reforms would revitalise and modernise the Soviet Union. Instead, it brought dissolution of the USSR into 15 post-Soviet states, after which he resigned his post as president on December 25, 1991. Following these developments, the republic declared its “sovereignty,” and in December, Russia was established as an independent country.

Since gaining its independence with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation became the largest nation to emerge, essentially describing itself as a federal presidential republic. Following the end of the USSR in 1991, the very idea of competing political parties and concept of “free and fair elections” was alien to the majority of citizens of the Russian Federation. In the republic’s first contested election in 1991, Boris Yeltsin emerged as the country’s first freely elected president. He drafted a new constitution, bringing up a new electoral system - a model whereby the Russian Federation elects by popular vote a head of state. According to the 1993 Constitution of the Russian Federation, Russia is a democratic federative jural state with a republican form of government. Multiple political parties are represented throughout the government and its administration. The executive, the legislative, and the judicial branches share responsibilities of running the country. Under the new constitution, the Federal Assembly became the country’s representative and legislature. It consisted of two chambers: the Federation Council (Sovyet Federatsii) and the State Duma (Gosudarstvennaya Duma). The State Duma has 450 members, elected for five-year terms since 2008, through a mixed electoral system. The Federation Council (Sovyet Federatsii) has 166 members: two delegates for each region, who are appointed by the president.

Under a semi-presidential structure, the president and the prime minister share governing responsibilities as head of state and head of government. However, the president does hold more power and is heavily involved in both the domestic and foreign policies of the country. Under the new constitution that was ratified on December 12, 1993, the president is elected in a national vote and cannot serve more than two terms consecutively. As Russia’s head of state, the president is empowered to appoint the chairman of the government (prime minister), key judges, and cabinet members. Initially (in 1991), the Russian President was elected for five years. In the 1993 Constitution, the term of office was reduced to four years. However, in 2008, former president Dmitry Medvedev signed a law extending the presidential term, which would bring Vladimir Putin back to the nation’s top office. The amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation, which came into force on December 31, 2008 and started with the 2012 elections, were the first substantial amendments to extend the presidential term length to six years.

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Soviet Electoral System

The history of Soviet Russia reflects a period of change, and shapes much of today’s Russian society, institutions, political affairs, transitions and mentality. In the middle of the 19th century, Russia entered a phase of internal crisis that in 1917 would culminate in a revolution. This internal crisis caused severe cultural and political damages to Russian society. Tsarism was built on rigid autocracy that would prevent and surpass the population from intervening and participating in any governmental actions. Therefore, its collapse was seen to be inevitable, made likely by deep-seated cultural and political flaws, which were exasperated under the enormous strain of World War I.

When the Bolsheviks took power in the October Revolution, also known as the Great October Socialist Revolution, its leader Vladimir I. Lenin promised to transform society and reverse the social injustices that had flourished under the former system. After the creation of the Soviet Union in 1917, the Congress of Soviet’s functioned as its legislative branch until its dissolution in 1936. However the election of delegates during its initial period involved bitter struggle between Bolshevik and non-Bolshevik members, raising questions about the Constituent Assembly and its role in the new society.

These questions were answered in 1918 when Lenin dissolved the Constituent Assembly after his party failed to produce a Bolshevik majority – claiming that the elections were counter-revolutionary and that its members were unrepresentative. During his leadership, the party transformed from a revolutionary group into a single-party dictatorship, enabling political power to become increasingly centralised and for elections themselves to be an empty formality. Therefore with the dissolution of the assembly, the country’s first real attempt at a democratic representative government had passed into history. And with the concentration of power in the hands of one authority - the ruling organs of the Bolshevik Party - Stalin, its new leader, had control over all party member appointments, granting him to build his base.

The adoption of a new constitution in December 1936 seemed to hold significant changes. Also known as the “Stalin Constitution,” the USSR stated that “all citizens of the USSR who have reached the age of 18, regardless of race or nationality, religion, educational qualifications, residency, social origin, property status and past activities, have the right to participate in the election of deputies and to be elected, with the exception of the insane and those convicted by the court with deprivation of electoral rights” (The Constitution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, 1936). It was envisioned that the new constitution would adopt a more democratic approach by providing equal suffrage for every man and woman aged 18 or over. However despite promises to extend individuals political and economic rights, these freedoms could only be exercised with the approval of the Communist Party. Therefore, the promises of the 1936 constitution were not truly fulfilled since Stalin had no intention on limiting the power of his party, which had control of the governmental machinery at all levels.

Joseph Stalin

J. Arch Getty (1991) states that: “Soviet Constitution of 1936 was adopted on the eve of the Great Terror of the late 1930s, the “thoroughly democratic” elections to the first Supreme Soviet permitted only uncontested candidates and took place at the height of the savage violence in 1937.”

At face value the constitution seemed to be highly democratic and were rigorously presented as such, however, “the civil rights, personal freedoms, and democratic forms promised in the Stalin constitution were trampled almost immediately and remained dead letters until long after Stalin’s death” (Getty, J. Arch, 1991:18). During his leadership, Stalin would encourage politicians to compete among policy options and in doing so he maintained several lines of communication and gave a semblance of democratic and participatory practices while operating in a dictatorial environment. In reality, however, power was centralised in the hands of the party leadership, whereby Stalin would
use the structures of the party to his own advantage and re-change and revise the process of elections and scrutinize the results. On December 12, 1937, elections were held in the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. According to official data, 96.8% of voters participated in the elections. 98.6% of who voted for the bloc of Communists and non-Party people (Журавлев & Фортунатов, 2013b). Since then, these data have given theoretical shape to future Soviet elections. Of course, there is no documentary evidence of this assumption. And official statistics is, to put it mildly, incomplete: only general results on the country, republic or oblast were published. The results of the voting at individual polling stations and even in individual electoral districts remained unknown, indicating that the matter was not kept completely transparent. The Central Committee and police apparatus dominated by Stalin controlled the work of all branches of government. Yet in reality these constitutional arrangements never came into function because of Stalin’s dominant position in the government. The 1936 Constitution and 1937 elections illustrated the limits of state power in its interactions with a multifaceted society and the legacy of the “Stalin Constitution” defined the parameters within which political decisions could successfully be taken in future elections.

Nikita Krushchev

Dictators come and go, but constitutional and institutional arrangements leave their traces and effects on the next generation. Stalin died in 1953, which caused crisis and chaos among the Politburo. How were they to choose Stalin’s successor? Nikita Krushchev emerged as a principal leader for a decade until 1964. It was an especially challenging period since the chip on his shoulder was the biggest carried by any leader in history. The question of how fair, honest and transparent the election process had been still remains a mystery. “It is difficult to assess to what extent these data (the official results of the elections held in the USSR) corresponded to reality,” experts in the electoral process Arkady Lyubarev, Andrei Buzin and Alexander Kynev acknowledge in their work on electoral fraud. The majority of citizens did go to the polls and voted for the proposed candidates (that is, they dropped the blank ballot into the ballot box), regarding this action as a ritual of expressing loyalty to the current government. For citizens who did not come to vote, members of the election commission usually dropped blank ballots (Московский Комсомолец, 2016b).

Krushchev took an active part in the Stalinist repressions, being the 1st secretary of the Moscow city and regional party committees. His primary goal after his succession was to ensure stability in the country. The main merit of Krushchev before the Soviet people was the implementation of the policy of de-Stalinization. David Reynolds in one of his articles describes Leonid Brezhnev years (1964-1982) as an “era of stagnation” (Reynolds, 2017:26). There was a mood of trust and optimism, and strong promise to

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Mikhail Gorbachev

At the January 1987 Plenum of the Central Committee of the CPSU, Mikhail Gorbachev suggested to adjust the electoral system, drafting an appropriate bill and publicly discussing it. Some experts believe that with the introduction of changes in the practice of election campaigns, the erosion of the Soviet political system began, which ended with the collapse of the USSR in December 1991 (Журавлев & Фортунатов, 2013e).

It seemed that the era of “elections without choice” was over. However running without opposition, Mikhail Gorbachev was elected the Soviet Union’s first executive president in 1995. The Congress of People’s Deputies voted to elect a president to a five-year term and then turn presidential elections over to the Soviet public. Yuri Osipyan, chairman of the parliamentary counting commission stated at the session of the congress that Gorbachev had won by 1,329 to 495 (Remnick, 1990a). Just before the vote, an Armenian deputy, Genrikh Igityan, stormed to the podium and said: “What has happened here? We did not find a single alternative…there were only three candidates and we knew all along that two would withdraw” (Remnick, 1990b). Both Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov and Interior Minister Vadim Bakatin withdrew their names before the ballot. There was never any question that Gorbachev would win the presidential election since he was the sole candidate. Therefore he faced harsh criticism for his old style policy-making, and failure to face a nationwide election campaign.

Boris Yeltsin

Gorbachev’s successor, Boris Yeltsin was a demagogue whose presidency was full of corruption, political disharmony and division. During his leadership, he became a deeply unpopular figure, gaining the image of an unpredictable, alcohol-fueled leader. The country suffered from widespread corruption and enormous political and social problems. He was the key player in bringing down the Soviet Union and the first leader in

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In order to promote Russia’s political influence around the world, a series of treaties were signed with the United States, Germany and other countries. Motivated with a desire to expand mutual understanding and to find mutually acceptable solutions to problems, European countries also committed to focus on the development of measures for security and cooperation in Europe. However, these commitments were replaced by a sharp aggravation of international contradictions by Russia: an intervention was made in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and in Afghanistan in 1979.

It was a dangerous era because of the nuclear arms race between the USA and USSR. Brezhnev’s excessive investment on military defence resulted in shortages in other sectors of the economy, marking the beginning of an era of social decline. In 1976, Brezhnev was awarded the rank of USSR marshal and in May 1997 he became the first person in Soviet history to hold both the leadership of the party and the head of state.

The new Constitution of the USSR, adopted on October 7, 1977, did not make any significant changes to the electoral legislation of the USSR. Candidates were to be nominated by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) or a public organisation. Nevertheless, all public organisations were under the control of the party and were subordinated in 1931 to the law, which required them to accept the rules of the party. The CPSU itself remained the only legal force in the country.

demolish the excesses of Stalin’s legal system. His policies aimed at humane socialism, but it was very limited and inconsistent. Instead Krushchev retained the structures of Stalinism: party control of the media, education, culture and elections.

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decades that was willing to stand up to the West with his ‘Slavophil spirit.’ He was conscious of the fact that the USSR could only be kept together and controlled by a strong central institution that was willing to use coercion. However, the central institution was marked by corruption, decreased industrial output and falling life expectancies.

The first presidential election in the Russian Federation was held on June 12, 1991. Boris Yeltsin received 57.3 percent, while his closest competitor Nikolay Ryzhkov, the leader of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), received 16.9 percent of the votes. In December 1993, Yeltsin called a referendum on the new constitution by increasing the powers of presidency, allowing him to govern primarily by executive decree in the coming years (Ria, 2011).

In 1998 the ruble collapsed and Yeltsin abruptly fired his entire cabinet. The following year the State Duma initiated an impeachment against Yeltsin for encouraging the breakup of the Soviet Union. The Duma, however, was unable to secure the necessary votes to proceed. However in December 1999, Boris Yeltsin shocked his nation and the rest of the world by announcing his resignation as president on live Russian television, stating that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin will take over as acting president. “I am going. I am going earlier than my established time,” he said. His final term in office continued until June 2000. He asked forgiveness for the “error of his administration,” and said that Russia needed to enter the new century with new political leaders.

**Vladimir Putin and “Authoritarianism”**

Vladimir Putin is widely viewed at home, as the man who curbed the excesses of Boris Yeltsin’s post-Soviet Russia, an era that many believe led to the destruction of the country’s economy as well as reputation. Growing up in a communal apartment, he loved spy novels and TV shows. In 1975 he began his career in the KGB as an intelligence officer and then in 1998 he was head of Federal Security. Putin worked mostly behind the scenes and kept a secret profile. He was a little-known figure among Russian people, until he became prime minister. But, with a 60 percent opinion poll approval rating, Vladimir Putin transformed into his country’s most popular politician – earning celebrity status and offering a strong and authoritarian style of rule. According to David Reynolds, Putin fits the Burkean stereotype of a Bonapartist figure bringing order after the anarchy of revolution (Reynolds, 2017: p.27). In March 2000, Putin was elected to his first term with 53 percent of the vote. After his elections, he began re-structuring the government and his policies. During his term he primarily focused on two agendas: the war with Chechnya and investigations into the business dealings of high-profile Russian citizens (oligarchs). When he understood that the oligarchs could overthrow him with their vast power of money by expanding their political influence, Putin decided to strike a deal with them. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, “In July [2000], Putin told the oligarchs that he would not interfere with their businesses or renationalise state resources as long as they stayed out of politics — that is, as long as they did not challenge or criticize the president.” And by using the Second Chechen War to his benefit - Putin gained power and popularity by bringing the concepts of “Slav”, “Our nation” and “Patriotism” into the discourse. From that moment, Putin learned how to use “war, violence and patriotism” to gain reputation and re-election.

In 2002, Chechen militants seized a Moscow theater. During a three-day calamity, Putin refused to negotiate with the hostage-takers, further boosting his fame and making him “a man of action.” His approval ratings increased by 30 percent.
Re-election March 2004

In 2004, Putin was re-elected for a second term. He continued to focus on domestic policies, however this time his main agenda was to crack down on the media. Taking control of mainstream Russian media, opposition figures were unable to express themselves freely. Sergei Yushenkov, liberal Russian lawmaker and outspoken critic of Vladimir Putin was shot and killed in his home in northwest Moscow before election campaigns started. He was killed just hours after announcing that Liberal Russia would take part in December’s Parliamentary elections. Similarly, Akhmednabi Akhmednabiyev, a Russian journalist in one of Russia’s top local newspapers, was shot from outside his house in Semender. The newspaper would openly criticize the authorities’ corruption within government. Building popularity in Dagestan, Akhmednabi would mostly cover stories regarding human violations in Russia and the political attitude of the authorities. Paul Klebnikov was an American journalist who worked for Forbes magazine for more than ten years and was reporting in Russia. He gained reputation for investigating Post-Soviet businesses and corruption. Klebnikov wrote an article for Forbes about Boris Berezovsky, who was the richest of seven oligarchs. On July 9, 2004, when he was leaving his office, he was attacked by unknown people who fired at him from a car. Anna Politkovskaja, a journalist who was seen as a symbol of freedom of speech in Russia, was murdered in her apartment in 2006 after she wrote about corruption in the Russian army with respect to Chechnya, specifically criticising the president in her book “Putin’s Russia”. She was killed on Putin’s birthday, but Putin denied any involvement, stating that her death would bring more harm to Russia than her reporting. Still Vladimir Putin was harshly criticised in the West for failing to protect the media. Two months later, the KGB defector Alexander Litvenenko was poisoned in London, which attracted the attention of all Western institutions. Litvenenko had fled Moscow in 2000 and whilst in exile in Britain became Putin’s most effusive critic.

Putin’s administration tightened its control over free expression, association and independent criticism. Parliament adopted new laws on power of law enforcement, control of media and public speech. In 2012, authorities used legislation to label and discredit nongovernmental organisations, including opposition groups and think tanks. According to Human Rights Watch there are more than 150 NGO’s that are now categorized as “foreign agents” by the Russian Ministry of Justice. By controlling TV stations as well as other media properties and eliminating opposition voices, Putin ensured that the Russian people would continue to show their support for the decades ahead.

Putin as Prime Minister

With a constitutional arrangement banning presidents to run for a third term, Putin was forced to step down in 2008, choosing Dmitry Medvedev as his successor to keep the chair warm and under control. After a few hours of Medvedev as president, he nominated Vladimir Putin as the country’s Prime Minister on May 7, 2008. It was a well-known fact that Putin was still regarded as the main power within the Kremlin, and no one would dare take steps without his permission.

In 2008, Medvedev signed a law extending the presidential term from four years to six, a move designed in preparation for Vladimir Putin’s eventual re-election to the nation’s top office. Putin, on the basis of amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation, which entered into force on December 31, 2008, starting with the 2012 elections, was elected for a six-year term of office. Entering to his third term, Putin’s new agenda was to change domestic affairs and foreign policy in order to regain popularity amongst citizens. Massive protests organised by government critics and political opposition groups grew - further restricting any opposing ideas to the system. He exacerbated relations with United States after granting political asylum to Edward Snowden, who is wanted by the US for leaking confidential information from the National Security Agency. This gave him the image of a powerful leader who was winning the “war” with the West.

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War as a Tool to Gain Popularity

The occupation of neighbouring states - particularly the Georgian war, where the conflict centred on South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008 - popularised the concepts of “Russian identity” and “Russian territory.” Everyday Russian Television channels informed citizens what crises the president averted and what international decisions were being taken to fix the state of Russia for the better. Consequently, in an attempt to win public opinion, Putin emerged as a leader who was going to make “Russia Great Again.”

The next step was going to be Crimea. It deserves special notice, because the Crimean Crisis bolstered Putin’s popularity within Russia. First we have to consider that Crimea has strong historical and cultural ties with Russia and is seen as a “red line.” In Russia’s popular imagination, Crimea was a place of national pride and glory. In the Soviet era, when rearrangements occurred inside the USSR, Nikita Krushchev transferred Crimea from Russia to Ukraine. Russian nationalists showed a huge reaction over this decision, and since then there has been strong efforts to ensure its return to Russia. Inside Russia, the decision to take over Crimea was extremely popular, according to the official poll by Levada, stating that 86 percent of the population wanted Crimea back. In February 2014, when Ukrainian president Victor Yanukovich was overthrown after months of protests, he fled to Russia. In March 2014, Putin used historical and cultural symbols to politicise the national patriotic sentiment and took control of Crimea, the Ukrainian autonomous republic whose population was predominantly ethnically Russian. Putin referred to the region as Novorossiya (“New Russia”). The government provided political and material support to the rebels inside the Crimea. This consequently created serious human rights violations - establishing a zone for Human Rights Watch and other organisations to enter the territory and analyse the situation. The president continued to support the rebels, failing to address the human rights violations that were aimed at him. Similarly, Russians perceived this as a “heroic” act undertaken by the president who was seen to display a “Slavophil spirit” - leaving the denigration and humiliation of the USSR in the past.

Media Control

In December 2015, parliament passed amendments where media outlets, broadcasters and publishers who were being funded from international sources were to face fines. In June 2016, a law was passed where individuals engaging in “actions that contradict to commonly accepted norms of behaviour or morality” were to be enlisted and placed on a watch list. In July 2016, Vladimir Putin signed a law to control counter-terrorism and counter-extremism known as “Yarovaya Law” - banning religious activities outside “specially designed places” and increasing penalties for vaguely defined “public justification of terrorism” (Refnews, 2016b). Law enforcement agencies were actively applying the new law in particularly to the traditional Muslim region of North Caucasus and Dagestan, whereby Russian media massively reported on the “radical activities” of residents supposedly leaving Russia and joining the Islamic State. Muslims were subjected to massive harassment and denigration. Several mosques were closed, including one in Dagestan’s capital city. Consequently, a concept of “New Traditional Islam” was introduced to the citizens - and those considered “not traditional” would end up going to jail with arbitrary detentions.
Russia’s “Holy War”

Russia’s “Holy War” in Syria would be Putin’s next act of seeking legitimacy to stay in power. The country’s staunch support of the Syrian regime, despite Western opposition, illustrates that they still have a strong influence on the political landscape in the Middle East. Putin’s vision of “Holy Russia in a Holy War” shared with the Orthodox Church, sees its main mission to expand its influence and authority over Central Asia, Caucasus and the Middle East - promoting “Russian traditional values” as well as that of the Orthodox Church. His constant rhetoric of defence, warfare, hatred and strife and his repeated use of the Orthodox Church, the armed forces and its missiles and the Federal Security of Russian Federation (FSB) in the forefront of all his discussions, has lead to people calling him the “Tsar.” Furthermore, the partnership between the Kremlin and the Orthodox Church ingrained “traditional” social values over Western liberal institutions. The Church became Putin’s “soft power” to gain authority over Orthodox Christians and national domestic identity. ROC priests were known to visit the battlefield in Eastern Ukraine and to bless the weaponry, including warplanes sent to Syria.

Today the Middle East is one of the most complex regions in the world, whereby the Syrian Civil War has created a power vacuum, drawing in multiple regional and global powers. The country’s politics and geography matters to Russia as they have ambitions to influence and control parts of the region. Russia will do everything in order to be closer to the Middle East than the U.S., even partake in “international interventions” in countries like Syria because it sees this as a Cold War and an anti-imperialist aspect of its policy. The Orthodox Church has deep historical connections with the Christian communities of the Middle East and is greatly concerned about their welfare, especially in Jerusalem, Iraq and Syria. Therefore, when the conflict in Syria began, the ROC began exerting pressure on the government to take a strong stand in the defence of Syrian Christians. Russians see themselves as a “Third Rome,” with a special duty to protect the Christian faith all around the world. Vladimir Putin vowed that Russia would help rebuild Christian churches in Syria and establish peace in the regions where Christian minorities are settled.

Valery Fedorov, director of the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (WCIOM) stated in one of his interviews that Putin went through his second symbolic birth. He transitioned from the category of a politician that might be compared to other public figures to the category of a historical figure - the ratings of which cannot be counted. His right to determine the future of the country is now beyond discussion and all the actions that he takes in office are supported by Russians who strongly believe that his policies show the world that Russia still holds power. Some experts argue that Vladimir Putin is now undergoing re-Stalinisation (Reinstating Stalin and Stalinism under Vladimir Putin) since he consolidated his rise to power through a mixture of war (Georgia, Chechnya, Ukraine, Syria), terror (attacks orchestrated by Putin) and control of media/opposition (killing of journalists, democrats, critics).

Silencing critics and actions opposing the administration’s ideals was Putin’s first and most effective method to gain power over the Kremlinists’. On February 27, 2015, opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was gunned down in Moscow, just after he had spoken out against Russian intervention in Ukraine. In January 2006, former Federal Security Service officer Alexander Litvinenko, an outspoken Russian critic was poisoned in the United Kingdom.
Fourth Term: Strategies to gain back power

Howard Swearer (1961) states that every government in history has striven for legitimacy. Some have found it in divine right, others in heredity and natural superiority, while others in the operation of natural law (Swearer, 1961). Within the last century, one of the most powerful legitimisers has been the popular mandate and image of a “strong leader” who had the support of the people, no matter how superficial that endorsement was obtained. By voting in the elections, people showed that they accepted the political system, which in return legitimised the leadership and its policies. Therefore, a totalitarian democracy rested on popular enthusiasm, charisma and fanaticism.

In December 2017, Putin announced that he would seek another six-year term as president in the March 2018 elections – choosing to run as an independent candidate. It was almost certain that he would win another six-year term. On March 18, 2018, Russian citizens overwhelmingly elected Putin for a fourth presidential term, with over 76 percent of the votes according to official results, extending Putin’s time in office to nearly a quarter of a century. His term as president extended until 2024, making him the first leader to serve two decades in power since Joseph Stalin.

Candidates and No Alternative (Partisan De-alignment)

Parties in the Federation have made Parliament the main source of their authority, but they have used their position to weak effect. Putin, however, has made real progress in weakening the power of the parliament. McFaul and Stoner-Weiss (2008) state that Putin’s own popularity may be “United Russia’s” greatest electoral asset and that constant positive coverage of party leaders on Russian media, overwhelming financial support from Russia’s oligarchs, and unanimous endorsement by Russia’s regional leaders have played a huge role in Putin’s control of the parliament.

When Putin was asked why he had not faced significant political opposition during his time in power, he answered with a rhetoric question, “Should I train contenders for myself?”. Adding that he welcomed “political competition” (Alec Luhn, 2017). Despite the widespread belief that Putin would be the ultimate leader in the March elections, he did have seven opponents also running for the presidency.
Who challenged Putin?

**Sergei Baburin**
He was deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR and the State Duma, and even the vice-speaker of the Duma, but his popularity reached its heyday in the late 90s and early 2000s. In 2008, his work in the State Duma was over, since then he could not be elected anywhere else. Baburin is the founder of the national-conservative party, "Russian National Union," who also nominated him to presidency. He was one of the organisers of the nationalist "Russian marches" in Moscow.

**Pavel Grudinin**
Grudinin was the Communist’s candidate for the presidential elections. However, according to the Russian Public Opinion Research Center, he is actually a capitalist. He was considered the most unexpected participant in the presidential race - until the nomination of his candidacy at the CPRF congress at the end of December where he publicly announced his intentions. He was the Director of "Lenin’s Farm" - one of the most famous strawberry producers in the country. Until recently, Grudinin had nothing to do with the Communists: in 2000 he was a confidant of Putin’s candidacy and in 2010 a member of the ruling "United Russia" party.

**Vladimir Zhirinovsky**
Zhirinovsky is a 71-year-old ultranationalist and right-wing populist who is famous for his xenophobic outbursts. He is a permanent leader of the LDPR and was nominated as a candidate four times for the presidency of Russia and once for the presidency of the RSFSR. He was not able to secure even second place in the elections. Despite the defeat, he continues to promote himself at all elections.

**Ksenia Sobchak**
Sobchak is known as a socialite and TV personality in Russia, and perceived as the country’s Paris Hilton. She is a journalist and has a startlingly liberal agenda. She reinvented herself as a new personality, becoming a political activist by taking part in opposition protests. Her late father, the first democratically elected mayor of St. Petersburg had close links to Putin early in his political career, but Sobchak herself denied Putin’s elections would be free and fair. She holds the political view that Crimea actually belongs to Ukraine and that Russia needs to improve its relations with the West. However, the West has identified Sobchak as a puppet of the Kremlin, who aimed to give the elections an air of legitimacy.

**Maksim Suraykin**
Suraykin is a Russian politician and leader of the political party “Communists of Russia” since 2012. On December 24, Maxim Suraykin was officially nominated at the Communists of Russia National Convention. On the same day he submitted his application for presidency to the Central Election Commission. During the election campaign, Maxim Suraykin strongly criticised the Communist party for the nomination of businessman Pavel Grudinin as a presidential candidate. In return, the Communist Party, the successor to the CPSU, called the party of Suraykin the spoiler of the Communist Party. Communists from the Communist Party even tried suing the “Communists of Russia” for using party symbols, but they failed in doing so.

**Boris Titov**
The leader of the Party of Growth, Presidential Commissioner for Entrepreneurs’ Rights, Boris Titov declared that he would participate in the presidential election on November 26, 2017. The Titov family owns the Abrau-Durso champagne factory, and Titov himself headed the board of directors of this company for many years. In the Duma elections, he gained 1.29 percent of the votes. According to a poll conducted by the All-Russia Public Opinion Research Center on January 26-28, 2017, it was predicted that he might get only 0.3 percent of the votes.

**Grigory Yavlinsky**
Russian economist and politician and the co-founder of the Yabloko party. He is best known for his 500 Days Programme, a plan for transition of the USSR to a free-market economy. He ran twice for Russian presidency - against Boris Yeltsin in 1996, and against Vladimir Putin in 2000. Yavlinsky was Party Yabloko’s nominee for President of Russia in the 2018 presidential election.

Putin’s next six-year term “legitimisation” policy

Turnout Matters and Illiberal Democracy

Yet again the Russian people did not have a real say in the elections, as the Kremlin prevented potentially competitive candidates from participating. Barred from the ballot in the March 2018 elections, Alexei Navalny called his supporters and all Russian citizens not to participate in the elections and boycott the “fake ritual of re-electing the president” (Galperovich, 2018). For him to participate in the elections was to simply play along with the Kremlin’s game. The most efficient way to weaken Putin’s administrative power in the eyes of the Russian, as well as the international community, was to depress the electoral turnout. To vote or not to vote…that was the question. Indeed, this has been a longstanding question for all Russian citizens for the last two decades. Ahead of the 2011 parliamentary elections, Navalny urged to vote for any party but the ruling United Russia (Barry, 2011). However, this time he changed his tactics. Armed with the knowledge that votes can be cast by the authorities and thus be rigged - he started trending using the hashtag #NeVybory2017-#Noelections2017. According to Navalny’s website, boycotts were planned in 115 Russian cities on Election Day. “Voter turnout is important to the leadership for its feeling of legitimacy,” said Andrei Kolesnikov, a senior fellow at the independent Carnegie Moscow Center think tank (Trainovski, 2018). Voter apathy is the most intimidating outcome for president Putin. His most suitable opponent for elections was not a candidate that could win, but rather someone who could attract as many people as possible to the polling station. Ksenia Sobchak was

Alexei Navalny?

Aleksey Navalny, an opposition activist who had first achieved popularity as an opposition leader of the 2011 protest movements, was repeatedly imprisoned. From spring 2017, authorities directly intervened in Navalny’s presidential campaign. In June 2017, Russia’s electoral body announced that Alexei Navalny, the opposition leader, was barred from standing in the following year’s elections. The Central Electoral Commission said Navalny was “not eligible to stand for office” because he was currently serving a five-year ban for embezzlement (Soldatkin & Osborn, 2017). Police across Russia searched Navalny’s office and started seizing campaign materials. Navalny’s sensational disclosures of high-level government corruption have generated both national and international interest on YouTube and other social media platforms.
one of the most intriguing presidential candidates and not your standard politician - a 35 year-old socialite who had over five million Instagram followers. The Russian TV personality had announced that she planned to run in the 2018 election, offering liberal voters - who were troubled by Putin’s reign and the country’s current instability - an alternative and credible option. However, although Sobchak had plenty of fame and popularity, she had little chance of winning. Cynics argued that the presence of a young, well-known liberal candidate such as Sobchak in the end only demonstrated why Putin was all but certain to win again. An obvious choice to draw attention to the polls would be a Russian celebrity who is known by 95 percent of the population (Russian Public Opinion Research Center, 2017). The paradoxical figure of the show-woman connected both with Putin’s media and with the liberal elite - with a high visibility factor among the public - solved the dilemma of legitimate opposition and sufficient representation at the polls.

Debate and the “No public Sphere”

Television debates are the most intriguing part of the election campaign. All candidates would appear in the TV studio together to present their election programs. Just like previous elections, Putin decided not to show up for political debates on state TV that ran between February 27 to March 15, although ‘all’ candidates were required to take part - further nullifying the facade of Russia pretending to hold democratic elections. His campaign pushed the narrative that there was no viable candidate for presidency and made sure that the state media was in control of this narrative. Russia-1, a state-owned Russian television channel, tried to explain the refusal of Putin to attend the debates by stating: ‘This is his legal right. First, he is busy at work. And everyone understands how busy he is. Secondly, Putin is already understood. Also there is a world famous pattern; it never makes sense for an invincible leader to enter into direct debate with outsiders.’

The first presidential debate on Russian TV saw the nationalist leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy verbally assaulting socialite-politician Ksenia Sobchak, who responded by pouring a glass of water over her rival. They were arguing about the collapse of the Soviet Union - but things quickly spiralled out of control. In the latest televised debate, Ksenia Sobchak walked off the stage in tears. She exited after each candidate was given a chance to make concluding remarks but when it came to her turn, other candidates repeatedly interrupted her. All these scandals, haranguing and denigration between the candidates actually amused and captivated the viewers’ attention. Citizens became even more involved in the ‘election campaign’ - and watched the competition as a reality show. Broadcast early morning or late at night and dominated by bickering and exchanges of accusations, these debates attracted attention only for the controversies that they created, says Stepan Goncharov, a sociologist at Moscow-based independent research centre, Levada.
American Antagonism and the relationship with the West

Russia’s inclusive diplomatic approach and assertive foreign policy can be considered the major reason for Putin success at the elections. Aside from his propaganda and exclusion of candidates, many Russians actually perceive Putin as a guarantor of Russia’s economic stability and national pride (Loffe, 2016). They believe that he can take the country on a course that brings them to the status of a great global power. The majority of Russians remember the horror of the 1990s — a period of brutal poverty, weak government, social degradation, and political uncertainty.

President Trump’s 2016 elections and the alleged Russian meddling of the campaign appear to be exacerbating the souring relations with the United States. International sanctions have heightened tensions between both countries, targeting Putin’s innermost circle of supporters and leaving economic effects on foreign investment. In Britain, Prime Minister Theresa May accused Putin’s administration over its alleged role in the poisoning of former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia, in Salisbury, U.K., on March 4, 2018 - which intensified the war of words between the two countries. Russia in turn accused Britain of igniting a new Cold War. Putin’s own perceptions of threats to his regime are another electoral factor - considering that he is strengthening his position against instability from real internal opposition, protests in Russian squares, and the popularity of the election ritual. The Kremlin sees America as an important and dangerous antagonist, which tries to undermine Russia’s sovereignty and foreign policy. Consequently, elections do reflect Putin’s reverberations in his foreign/domestic policy.

The year 2018 began dynamically for Russia and especially for Putin who legitimized his presidency by using the West as a tool to bolster a tough image of victory over his rivals. Vladimir Putin boasted that Russia had developed nuclear weapons capable of bypassing any missile defence system. This Cold War style of rivalry shows that his two-hour presidential address to the Federal Assembly was an ostentatious display of Russia’s nuclear technology, threatening to exacerbate ties between Russia and the West. He made statements like: “why do we need such a world if there is no Russia?” and “the world would have to listen to Russia now!” (Wesolowsky, 2018).

The differences between the 2012 and 2018 election outcome can be viewed as a product of demographic changes in the voter population (European Platform for Democratic Elections, 2018). Therefore we have to focus on the implication behind the elections, expecting more assertion, audacity and effrontery of Russian interest to the West. The US sees Russian propaganda as effective, subtle and insidious. NATO has always been concerned of Russian belligerence, which in turn has caused a harsh reaction from the West.
Diplomat War between West and Russia - Expulsion of the Diplomats

Britain and Russia are experiencing their most intense diplomatic crisis since the Cold War over the poisoning of former Russian military intelligence officer Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Salisbury just before the March elections. During the 1990’s and early 2000s, Skripal acted as a double agent for the UK’s intelligence services. His attempted murder in British soil has led to accusations of Russian state involvement. Prime Minister Theresa May stated that the chemical used in the attack had been identified as a neurotoxin developed by Russia known as “novichok”, which means “newcomer” in Russian and that the Russian state was “culpable” for the poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter (BBC News, 2018c). In a similar vein, Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said Russian President Vladimir Putin was “overwhelmingly likely” to have ordered the attack (BBC News, 2018a). As a result, the UK expelled 23 diplomats. In addition, the Royal family agreed not to attend the FIFA World Cup in Russia this year. All planned high-level contacts were suspended and checks on private flights were increased. At least 45 Russian diplomats were expelled across Europe in an orchestrated reaction by the West. Furthermore the United States expelled 60 diplomats and ordered the closure of Moscow’s consulate in Seattle. Moscow considered this step “an unfriendly provocative gesture of notorious solidarity”, in a statement published on the Foreign Ministry’s official website. The incident had drawn comparisons to the 2006 assassination of former KGB agent Alexander Litvinenko after drinking radioactive tea. However, Russian ambassador to London, Alexander Yakovenko stated that the British government did not provide any proof of Russia’s alleged involvement in the poisoning incident. The Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said there would be a response to the mass expulsion. A few days after he made his statement, Russia decided to close the U.S consulate in St. Petersburg and “expel the same number of diplomats” in a tit for tat expulsion (TASS Agency, 2018). In total five countries have expelled Russian diplomats over the poisoning.

Aftermath

The next six years for Russia will certainly be a policy of isolationism and protectionism. Foreign Policy will always be blurred, because Russia is ready to break the rules of the game when it comes to foreign policy. “Putin is a kind of Messiah type leader,” Pozner states. “He is a patriot, he cares about Russia as he sees it, [and] he thinks he cares about Russia more than others do.” Putin’s 80 percent approval ratings would indicate that Russians think so too. Despite sanctions and subsequently a poorer standard of living compared to three years ago, Putin has given his followers something they believe in. “He plays to their sense of pride,” says Pozner. “He has brought Russia back, made it again a force to the rest of the world. Now he wants Russia to be taken into consideration – especially by the U.S” (Karabell, 2016).
Turkey’s position over Russia-West tensions

Turkey continues to play a significant role in the Russian-Western relations. Ankara takes an active part in the settlement of international conflicts taking place in neighbouring countries and in the world. Over the poisoning of an ex-spy in the U.K, use of chemical weapons is accepted as “a war against humanity” by Turkey. Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesman Hami Aksoy stated that Turkey views the attack in the U.K. as a chemical attack and condemns it. Turkish Deputy PM and government spokesman Bekir Bozdag recently said that Turkey was not planning to act against Russia. He also added that “there is a positive and good relation between Turkey and Russia. In this sense, Turkey is not contemplating on taking any action against Russia.”

Conclusion

Russian history has witnessed the rise and demise of numerous political parties. One common thread, though, is that all rulers would hold electoral institutions to win and maintain status quo at all costs. The system is believed to inherently lack transparency and is mired with political scandals, connections with organized crime, suppression of the public sphere, and the muzzling of opposition voices. The March 2018 elections have produced no surprises. Experts were certain that Putin would be re-elected and rule for the next six years. However, the real question that needed to be asked was not ‘who will win the elections?’ but rather ‘why Putin is being re-elected for a fourth term?’ Russia’s political systemic discrepancies with weak parties and a rather shallow democratic political culture provide more space for the ruling elites to fully control state institutions and shape elections. In the light of the above, it remains to be seen what impact the March elections will have on Russia’s future.
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