



Putin's fourth term The twilight begins?

by Stanislav Secrieru & Vitali Shkliarov

The Russian electoral cycle began with parliamentary and partial local elections in September 2016, continued with presidential elections in March 2018, and ended with a series of regional elections in September 2018. The incumbent United Russia (UR) party boosted the number of seats it controls in the lower house of parliament, the Duma, by 105 compared to 2011,¹ and despite a few local defeats in 2018, remained the dominant political force across the country. Dmitry Medvedev kept his seat and position as prime minister and the government itself underwent only a moderate reshuffle. Moreover, President Putin not only avoided any weakening of his own position but, on the contrary, arguably grew stronger as he was re-elected by almost 10 million more votes than in 2012.² There are no serious potential challengers on the horizon and he remains the sole person who takes important domestic and foreign policy decisions.

With the dust now settling, Russia's political system appears strong and durable at first glance. However, on closer inspection, the political landscape is less stable and more crisis-prone than at any time in the recent past. The illusion of stability conceals multiple weaknesses, which are slowly sapping the vitality of the political system. The presidency, the system's key institution, is a case in point. Given his easy victory in March

2018, it seems counterintuitive to argue that President Putin is becoming progressively weaker. Nevertheless, several factors are gradually undercutting his standing, a process which, in turn, is likely to have future knock-on effects for Russia's

Summary

- > Russia recently concluded a major electoral cycle (2016-2018) that extended the life-expectancy of the current political system.
- > By all outward signs, the president, the system's key figure, has avoided any weakening of his position and emerged stronger after the elections.
- > Nonetheless, President Putin faces four short- and long-term vulnerabilities: a lack of an appealing metanarrative for a fourth term in office, declining output legitimacy, an overconcentration of power and expectations surrounding his eventual departure from the Kremlin.
- > Regardless what decision the president makes by 2024 (to stay or leave), Russia has entered a prolonged period of uncertainty and fluctuations in political power are looming.



entire political edifice. What vulnerabilities does President Putin face in his fourth term in office? What are the drivers behind them? And how might these play out in the future?

The lack of a metanarrative

The first vulnerability is that Putin's (probable) last presidential term lacks an overarching narrative that goes beyond securing voter turnout on the day of elections; one which could help preserve public backing for the duration of his mandate. Previously, he skilfully used such narratives to set and dominate the public agenda while maintaining majority support. This helped to minimise the scale of repressive tactics and allowed him to govern largely by consent.

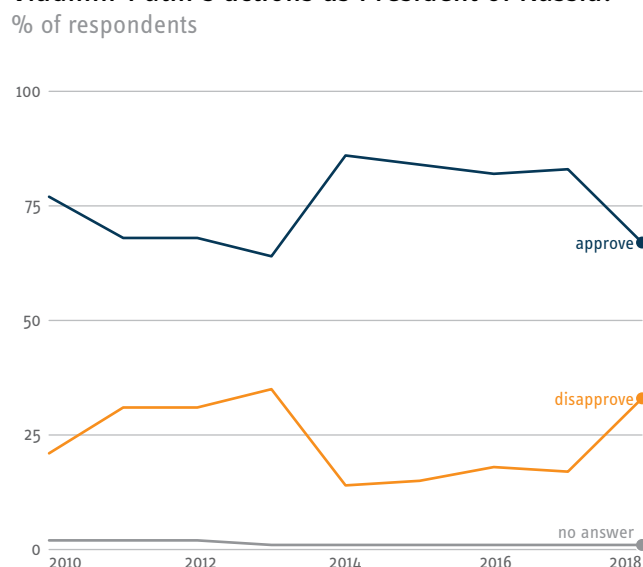
In 2000, for instance, Putin built his campaign around the mission to regain control over the Chechen Republic and restore order to a country shaken by a prolonged economic crisis and rampant crime.³ In 2004, Putin declared “war” on the oligarchs who had enriched themselves in the 1990s while the general population became poorer, and promised greater prosperity to citizens.⁴ After Medvedev's *intermezzo* (the 2008-2012 period that coincided with the modernisation narrative),⁵ Putin returned to power in 2012 under the banner of conservative values (family, religion, patriotism).⁶ This conservative message was reinforced by the annexation of Crimea in 2014, as it resonated emotionally with many Russian citizens who perceived Ukrainian sovereignty over the peninsula after the collapse of the Soviet Union as a “historical injustice”.⁷

But in 2018, Putin and his campaign staff failed to generate a metanarrative which convincingly explained why the incumbent president deserved a renewed mandate. They also failed to lay out the direction in which the president wanted to take the country during his new term. Thus, Putin's campaign lacked aspirational elements. Instead of inventing a new narrative or even recycling old ones, his supporters framed the re-election bid as a necessity for the country – in other words, “because there are no viable alternatives to Putin”.⁹ The message indicated that without Putin, living standards and public order might suffer, thereby encouraging people to opt for stability. This probably helped to secure his re-election, but might not be enough to ensure sustained public backing.

Between April and September 2018, Putin's approval rating slipped dramatically from 82% to 67% (the lowest in four years). Moreover, the number of people who think that the country is heading in the wrong direction went up from 27% in March 2018 to 41% in September 2018.⁹

Of course, this trend is multi-causal. Unpopular decisions pushed by the Kremlin, such as raising Value Added Tax (VAT) from 18% to 20% and increasing the retirement age (from 55 to 60 for women and from 60 to 65 for men),¹⁰ took a toll on the president's ratings. But at the same time, the absence of a persuasive grand narrative deprives Putin of a powerful tool to manage public expectations, divert attention and combat dissatisfaction if needs be.

Figure 1 | Overall, do you approve or disapprove of Vladimir Putin's actions as President of Russia?



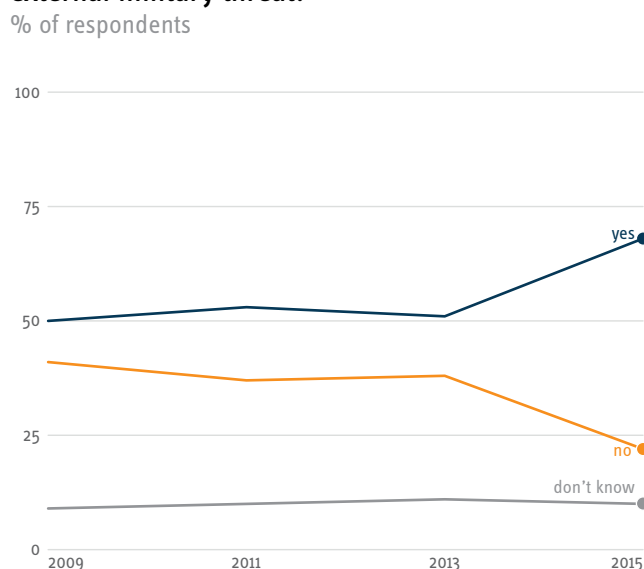
Data: Levada-Center, 2018

Two examples demonstrate how a metanarrative can make a difference in the midst of painful reforms. In 2014, the government launched a new phase of healthcare reform, which sought to reduce the number of hospitals and medical personnel. The Accounts Chamber of Russia concluded in 2015 that, as a result, medical services worsened and became more costly and less accessible.¹¹ The poorly planned and executed reforms were met with vocal opposition from medical professionals, but not from the public at large: the Kremlin's patriotic narrative which centred on safeguarding Russia from external threats helped to capture public attention and prevent mass demonstrations on social issues. It is therefore no surprise that a Levada-Center opinion poll revealed that the number of Russians who believed that Russia faces an external military threat went up from 51% in 2013 to 68% in 2015.¹² The doctors' protests eventually fizzled out in 2015, and there was thus no need to resort to large-scale repression.

In 2018, however, the plan to raise the pension age was not backed by a larger narrative which would either explain the rationale of the reform or deflect public attention from it. Instead, the Kremlin decided to push it quickly through parliament

during the summer holidays and the FIFA World Cup (hosted by Russia) in June-July 2018. But the move backfired: in the absence of a convincing narrative, the painful reform was perceived by the public as a hasty and cynical attempt to transfer the costs of government blunders to common citizens.¹³ Opinion polls revealed that 89% of respondents opposed the pension reform,¹⁴ and even President Putin's lengthy TV intervention in August to retroactively defend this measure and placate public anger had no effect. On the contrary, 39% of respondents thought that the president's proposals to soften the reform changed nothing, while 25% thought that his proposals made things worse.¹⁵ Dissatisfaction with the reform spilled over into the streets: protests against the pension reform rocked Russia throughout late August and early September 2018.¹⁶ In order to restore calm, the Kremlin had to step up repression.

Figure 2 | Does Russia face an external military threat?



Data: Levada-Center, 2018

Declining output legitimacy

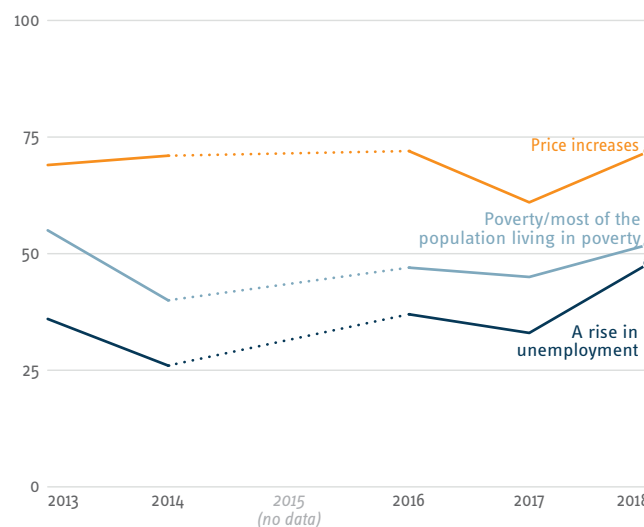
The second weakening factor at play is the president's declining capacity to deliver (also known as 'output legitimacy').¹⁷ While the aforementioned grand narrative(s) helped Putin project a vision of the future, each time he ran for office he also backed his candidacy with a successful track record. In 2000, he drew on his past role as the prime minister (August 1999-May 2000) who took up the fight against the Chechen rebels. In 2004, Putin ran as someone who as president brought order to the country after the chaos of the 1990s. Upon his return in 2012, he relied on his crisis management skills as prime minister (during the 2008-2012 mandate) to prove he was the one who safely steered Russia through the global financial crisis and limited the damage to the prosperity of ordinary citizens.

In 2018, Vladimir Putin tried to capitalise on his achievements in the foreign and security policy field. For instance, the election day was purposefully moved to the anniversary of Crimea's annexation, so as to act as a reminder of Putin's recent foreign policy victories. However, whereas support for the annexation of Crimea remains consistently high in opinion polls (88% in March 2018),¹⁸ its emotional effect has naturally decreased with the passage of time. Simultaneously, the public is less and less impressed with the Kremlin's foreign policy stunts: in January 2017, 64% considered Russia's foreign policy a success, whereas this number declined to 52% by August 2018. When respondents were asked what are the main failures of Russia's foreign policy, after tensions with West (sanctions) and Ukraine, they listed domestic price hikes and declining living standards.¹⁹

Interviews by Russian sociologists with focus groups support this notion of an increase in public anxiety about the financial impact of foreign policy adventures on citizens' prosperity. In particular, respondents complain that too much attention and money is spent on defence and military operations, resent the costs associated with Crimea's annexation, and express alarm over the prospects of Russia financing Syria's reconstruction.²⁰ It seems that after four consecutive years of falling living standards, society's mood is slowly changing. In 2017, citizens' real incomes fell to 2009 levels.²¹ At the same time, concerns over social problems reached or surpassed the levels seen before the annexation of Crimea (see Figure 3).²² Therefore, despite attempts by the president to surf on a wave of foreign policy successes, the public is slowly awakening to the dangers and costs of Russia's assertive foreign policy.

Figure 3 | Three societal problems which worry Russians most

(multiple answers possible)



Data: Levada-Center, 2018

Given the circumstances, citizens expect the president to re-pivot from external to domestic politics and are waiting for him to take action on the economic front, where Putin does not have any recent tangible wins to show. Moreover, in order to ensure fiscal health, the Kremlin needs to go beyond partial measures to plug the pension fund deficit. The irony is that deep structural economic reforms, at least in the short and medium term, will weaken the president's popularity and correspondingly his legitimacy. There is therefore a lack of political will to enforce the far-reaching economic transformations which are required. But even if such resolve existed, the Russian political system, with its hegemonic president, has one inbuilt weakness that undermines its capacity to deliver; the over-concentration of power.

An overconcentration of power

The history of President Putin's rule can be summed up as an endless quest to concentrate power. Previously independent actors from the 1990s (governors, oligarchs, parliamentarians) were forced to fall into line and find their place in the Kremlin-centred machine of governance, the so-called 'power vertical'.

This over-concentration of power bred a micro-management style of governance. In turn, this discouraged initiative and made bureaucracy, in the absence of explicit orders from the top, often unresponsive to people's needs as bureaucrats sought to 'play it safe'. For example, over the last years several national emergencies (including fires and floods) were dealt with effectively only after the direct intervention of the president. In some cases (such as the floods in Krymsk), more aid was delivered in the early stages by self-organised volunteers than by the state institutions.²³

Another prominent example is the frequent visits by President Putin to Sochi ahead of the Olympic Games in 2014, which were supposed to put pressure on officials in order to ensure that all sporting venues and facilities were finalised on time.

On the one hand, such an approach strengthens the president, as it demonstrates that he is the only actor with the power to solve problems. It also helps to build his public image of a 'good tsar' and outsource responsibility for mistakes to 'bad boys'²⁴ – in this case, the state's top bureaucracy. On the other hand, it weakens the president as for every problem solved there are numerous issues left

unattended, for which he simply has no time or energy to focus on.

This reliance on micromanagement requires a hyperactive president. It is not enough for Putin to sign decrees and issue orders: he needs to control their execution lest they remain only on paper. According to data released in 2015 by the All-Russia People's Front, a coalition of pro-Kremlin non-governmental organisations and movements, 40% of presidential decrees and orders were not executed.²⁵ Even the presidential administration recognises that there is a problem with the speedy enforcement of normative acts issued by the president: the Presidential Control Directorate itself stated in 2015 that 70% of the president's decrees and orders had been shelved or implemented with significant delays.²⁶

In May 2018, President Putin signed a decree laying out new ambitious economic and social targets for Russia until 2024. But the chances that the decree will be implemented are lower than in 2012, when Putin issued similar decrees (which themselves had a poor rate of implementation).²⁷ The lack of funds available (estimated to be \$125 billion) is only half of the explanation.²⁸ An over-centralised system with an aging leader at its helm is the other half.

Expectations about departure

A final factor that enfeebles President Putin is the patronal nature of the political system which he himself built. A patronal network forms the foundation of this system, which structures and mediates informal power relations between the patron and clients, on the one hand, and among clients, on the other hand. The president is the unquestionable master of the network, the upper echelons of which are composed of the president's friends, former colleagues and trusted officials. The bottom rungs of the network accommodate a larger swath of elites. As the ultimate controller of state resources, the president can reward clients for sustained loyalty or punish them for perceived disloyal acts. Thus, the capacity to police the network is essential for maintaining its discipline and stability. Elections are another key element for the network's durability: they represent a critical moment as the patron must display the capacity to muster sufficient resources to secure both an overwhelming victory and re-confirm his

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hegemonic status.²⁹ President Putin recently did well on both accounts.

However, the key element for the patronal network's stability is the clients' expectation that the patron will stay in power in the future.³⁰ Back in 2007, as Putin's second mandate neared the end, anxiety among his clients grew and voices calling for him to stay for another term (despite the constitutional limit) became louder.³¹ The dilemma was settled through 'castling': Dmitry Medvedev became president, while Vladimir Putin took over the executive position. The latter moved the centre of gravity to the Russian White House and thus continued to preside informally over the patronal network. This, however, proved not to be a sustainable solution. Small numbers of elites coagulated around Medvedev hoping to see him run for a second term and build his own power base. Thus, in 2012 Putin returned to the Kremlin to prevent the network from further erosion and eventual collapse. Medvedev gave up on plans for an independent run, and at the end of his presidential term loyally vacated the office for Putin (even though constitutionally he could have run for another term). This ensured six years of relative calm.

For President Putin, the 2018 mandate is the last one under the current constitutional term limits. Although there are still six more years to go, the tensions among clients regarding the future power architecture will grow with every passing year. The president has repeatedly denied an intention to introduce amendments allowing him to stay in the Kremlin beyond his current term.³² These declarations also deeply unsettle the network's clients who have no clear indication about the patron's, and accordingly their, future. The challenge for Putin is how to keep these anxieties about his possible (scheduled or unexpected) exit in check and maintain peace in the network. What is certain is that this protracted vulnerability will haunt the president in the years to come.

Managing creeping weaknesses

In the past, a combination of a grand narrative and output legitimacy helped President Putin to govern largely by consent rather than coercion. The deficit of both elements in his fourth term makes governance more costly. To maintain stability and ensure compliance, Putin will have to rely more on targeted coercion. New repressive drives – which include arrests and short spells in prison or harassment

campaigns that seek to force political opponents to leave the country – are already discernible. For example, one study found that the number of political parties barred from local elections in 2018 increased by 50% compared to the local elections in 2016.³³ The arrest in August 2018 of several opposition leaders (among them Alexey Navalny and

Sergei Udaltsov) in relation to the pension reform protests came as another sign of growing repression.³⁴ In the coming years, the space for independent opposition is poised to shrink yet further.

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Still, it appears that Putin is striving to recover some sort of output legitimacy and will thus seek to minimise the scale of repression. To govern by consent is always cheaper: there are attempts to compensate for the lack of an overarching narrative of his presidency with grand infrastructure and social projects, for instance. These mega projects, besides rewarding clients of the patronal network via state-awarded contracts, have the aim of instilling pride and creating an impression of rapid modernisation.³⁵ The opening of the Kerch bridge connecting continental Russia with the annexed Crimean peninsula ahead of the presidential elections and Putin's proposal to erect another mega-bridge in the far east (to the island of Sakhalin), both widely trumpeted by domestic media outlets, support this assumption.³⁶

President Putin's interest in high-visibility projects is likely to affect oligarchs who will be 'asked' to co-finance them. The proposal by the presidential economic adviser Andrei Belousov's to collect \$7.5 billion from Russia's big businesses for social and economic modernisation plans is an early sign of the Kremlin's intentions to squeeze more funds from the private sector for its pet projects.³⁷ This message was reiterated by Putin himself in a more subtle form during 4th Eastern Economic Forum, when he proposed to "think how to stimulate Russian exporters to channel part of revenues to effective economic and social projects in the far east".³⁸ It is also likely that this trend will intensify.

It cannot be ruled out, however, that in addition to mega projects, President Putin might once again resort to a more assertive foreign policy to restore legitimacy – 50% of Russians still regard the recent past as a success in foreign policy terms. Nevertheless, military adventures abroad do not come without costs, and the public has lately shown a preference for governance which focuses on solving rising internal economic problems. Moreover, in the aftermath of the pension reform

Figure 4 | Russian mega-projects and events

including budget estimates in \$ billion



Data: Multiple public sources

debacle, society's tolerance and patience with new economic burdens might run thin. Thus, unlike in the cases of Crimea and Syria, another attempt to use pugnacious foreign policy to restore legitimacy at home has a serious chance of backfiring.

The president has sought to improve the inefficiency of the highly centralised system. However, he chose to optimise the system in its existent form rather than opt for decentralisation. This optimisation is being conducted with a biological factor in mind: the old loyalists in the presidential administration and central and local governments are slowly being replaced with younger (and expectedly more efficient) officials. The trend was observable during the previous presidential mandate (in 2016, the head of the presidential administration Sergey Ivanov was replaced by the much younger Anton Vaino), and is likely to gather pace as the ruling elite ages. However, it is a temporary fix. As one Russian observer put it: "the elite has undergone a rejuvenation, not through cultivation, but through additives. As a result, its resources have become more reliable, but only for a limited time."³⁹

There are also children of former high officials among the young cadres.⁴⁰ If previously they were mostly promoted to top positions in state corporations and

banks, in 2018 a new development occurred: the position of minister of agriculture went to the son of one of Putin's close associates.⁴¹ Often, the appointment of privileged children is not designed to enhance the efficiency of the state apparatus, but to ensure loyalty and stave off rebellion by aging clients.⁴²

The expectations concerning Putin's eventual departure is the trickiest of all the vulnerabilities to deal with, and he will probably delay the decision until his final days in office in order to avoid becoming a lame duck. The longer he procrastinates, however, the deeper the disquiet will be among elites and the higher the risks are of intra-elite squabbles getting out of control. To keep anxious elites behind him or prevent the formation of alliances which might challenge him, the president will most likely increasingly resort to repressive tactics.

Previously, Putin combined sticks and carrots to ensure elite loyalty. However, in his third mandate, he began to rely more than before on repression as a means to control elites.⁴³ This was largely conducted under the banner of fighting against corruption: there was a marked increase in the number of cases where secondary-level elites (regional

or federal officials) were arrested and sentenced for corruption. Still, this phenomenon has not reached sweeping levels and appears to be designed to have an 'educational' effect on top-tier officials.⁴⁴ On the one hand, repression may ensure greater compliance and thereby cement the network's stability. On the other hand, large-scale repression can also trigger serious discontent within the network.

Even if Putin successfully navigates these challenges and decides to stay in power as president (UR currently holds a constitutional majority in the Duma so a constitutional change is not legally impossible) or in any other official position which would allow him to lead from behind after 2024, expectations surrounding his exit will not just persist but worsen. In 2024, Putin will turn 72, and the anticipation of his eventual retirement will be more acute than in 2018.

Putin will probably remain in power after 2024, but an alternative scenario cannot be ruled out. The contours of any future power arrangement without Putin may take shape earlier than 2024, but what could signal that a reset of the system is imminent? A significant restructuring of the political landscape (including the leading political parties) ahead of next Russian parliamentary elections in 2021 could be one of the indicators. It is also not impossible that the current government will not serve the full term. Although Putin has not changed governments in the middle of presidential term, this might happen for the first time after the Duma elections in 2021. Replacing an unpopular government (which implemented the pension reform) with a new one led by a young promising prime minister could be another mark that the president has made up his mind to pass the baton in 2024.

The future of EU-Russia relations

The way President Putin is handling his accumulating domestic weaknesses does not indicate a radical change in the tone and substance of EU-Russia relations in the short to medium term. Greater repression (even if targeted) might increase the number of Russian activists or business people seeking sanctuary in EU member states. In turn, this will underscore the ever-growing normative gap between the EU and Russia. However, to bridge the gap, bidding for Putin's mega infrastructure projects might be open not only for the patron's clients but also to some extent for European businesses, too. The working assumption in the Kremlin is that the private sector still can be a useful channel to erode the EU's principled collective stance on Russia, which emerged in the wake of the annexation of Crimea.

At the same time, to avert further erosion of domestic legitimacy at a low cost the Kremlin will not hesitate to use old – or initiate new – crises in the EU's eastern and southern neighbourhood. Seen from this perspective, a Ukraine absorbed by its upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections or a war-torn Syria (in case the deal on Idlib collapses, for example) remain attractive targets for the Kremlin. However, such external engagements might not pay off domestically. Thus, still feeling vulnerable at home, the Kremlin will probably be tempted to continue cultivating discontent in EU member states via persistent cyber meddling in public debates (to amplify existent societal cleavages) and electoral processes.

A reshuffle at the very top of the Russian state (before or after 2024) may open a window of opportunity to rethink the EU's current approach to bilateral relations. That said, it is also equally possible that EU-Russia relations under a new ruler in the Kremlin could take a turn for the worse. Alternatively, a disorderly and inconclusive power transition is likely to generate a cacophony of political messages coming from Moscow and thus bring more uncertainty (at least in the short term) regarding the future of EU-Russia relations.

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