

STASIS, CRISIS OR PUTINISM RELOADED?

Taking stock of domestic politics in Russia

Event Summary

To facilitate the debate on the EU's approach to Russia, the EUISS convened a closed-door event on 7 February 2024 in Brussels, bringing together Russia experts and EU policy makers to focus on possible undercurrents of discontent within the Russian governing elite, and Russian society at large. The task at hand was to collectively ascertain whether the elites and the society are headed towards a period of long-term equilibrium (or stasis), to identify the conditions that might trigger the emergence of a crisis – in the sense of a profound rupture and transformation in Russia's system of rule – and to establish whether 'Putinism' will become more repressive as a way of managing problems arising from difficulties in adapting to internal and external pressures, and with what consequences.

The debate was conducted under Chatham House rules. The summary below does not represent a consensus reached among the participants, but seeks to reflect, in a concise and consolidated fashion, the variety of views expressed in the debate.

Putin's Russia can best be characterised as a modern institutionalised state with a medieval court at its centre, operating under hybrid totalitarianism (that is, not absolute totalitarianism). The regime in its current form is highly repressive, and society docile and complicit. In a sense, an *anti-perestroika* movement is now discernible in Russia, with the Kremlin creating a fluid social environment in which what is tolerated today may no longer be tolerated tomorrow.

The ruling elite in Russia is to some extent a black box. That said, it can be divided in three broad groups. The (1) enthusiasts heartily support Putin's every move. The (2) large majority (kleptocrats and technocrats) are not particularly excited about the imperialist adventurism that prevails today, but at the same time do not wish for Russia to lose in Ukraine. Finally, there are the (3) opportunists who seek to exploit the current situation (as they would any) to their advantage. They now exhibit absolute loyalty to the regime, but should their rational calculus dictate otherwise, they could be the first

to change their allegiance. By their nature, they are engaged in an intense competition for available resources – causing some frictions within the regime.

Putin's aversion towards reshuffling the top echelons of his 'power vertical' has produced a gerontocratic inner circle of advisers and officials who are hyperloyal to the regime. Indeed, Putin's control over the elite, and his uncontested supremacy within the Kremlin, is unprecedented. But his aversion to change also creates vulnerabilities of its own.

There are undercurrents of discontent within Russian society at large, but there are significant constraints on the expression of dissent. Change is possible, however. In the foreseeable future, the most likely factor to trigger change would be a Ukrainian victory over Russia. The economy can also play a role when contemplating future change. There is, even in Russia, a limit on what the population is willing to tolerate. A breaking point induced by structural economic issues may take years to arrive, however – even if, until that point is reached, the state will have an increasingly difficult job keeping the large middle stratum of the society satisfied with less and less money to spend. The 'demographic problem' will also continue to exert pressure on the economy.

While Russia is far less isolated globally than it is in relation to the EU, and seeks to forge new international coalitions both multilaterally (e.g. BRICS) and bilaterally (many states in Africa), and even a global authoritarian/revisionist governance coalition, Moscow's soft power abroad is often overestimated. Russia's relationship with China should equally be put in perspective. Whatever Moscow gets from Beijing, it needs to pay for – and it is all too aware of the weak position in which it has put itself, as it sees its dependence on China grow.