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- Many in Russia have expressed their disappointment with Putin's decision to run for a third presidential term. They claim that Putin is becoming the new Brezhnev and that the stability he was once praised for bringing about in Russia is now turning to stagnation.
- Cynicism and disillusionment with the Putin regime seem to be becoming more widespread in Russia. Ever-increasing corruption, lack of the rule of law and political competition as well as lack of innovation and dynamism in the economy all reinforce the general feeling of pessimism.
- One would expect that the weakening legitimacy of the regime would lead to vocal demands for change. However, this is not the case in Russia, where several historical, political, structural and sociological conditions make wider popular protests unlikely.
- The tragedy of today's Russia seems to be that the regime is too weak to reform itself, yet simultaneously strong enough to prevent viable alternatives to its rule from gaining ground. Despite the likelihood of a negative future trajectory, Putin's Russia seems set to drag on.

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The not-so-dynamic duo at the United Russia party congress in September 2011. Photo: www.kremlin.ru.

After Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's announcement in September that he would run for the presidency in 2012, one word has dominated the public debate in Russia: stagnation (*zastoi*). Surprisingly, many Russians have expressed their disappointment with the 'return' of Russia's strongman.

Various journalists and experts are now arguing that Putin is becoming the new Brezhnev and that the stability he was once praised for bringing about in Russia is now turning to stagnation – a kind of 'zastoi 2.0'.

The argument is not a new one. In fact, President Medvedev has warned of the dangers of stagnation more than once. He argued against Russia's current lack of political competition in his video blog in November 2010, while at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum in June he reiterated that "stability could hide another period of stagnation".

It is easy to find similarities between the Russia of today and the USSR of the 1970s: the elite's increasing separation from the people, the suppression of dissenting voices, the absence of major economic reforms and the semblance of a stable society – despite the widespread feeling of disenchantment with and non-belief in the system – coupled with an aging leader. The once youthful and dynamic Putin will be celebrating his 60th birthday next year, and if he stays on for two more terms as president, he will be 72 years old by the end of the second one.

Brezhnev's many legacies

In fact, not everyone in Russia views stagnation as a gloomy option by any means. In a recent TV interview, Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, shared his view that the elitist talk about the 'Brezhnevization' of Russia should not be seen as a criticism. According to him, the Brezhnev era was all in all a positive period in Russian history, and the leader should be given credit for laying the foundations of Russia's current agriculture and economy. Indeed, the foundations of Russia's global energy export were laid through the development of oil and gas fields and the connecting infrastructure to Europe built during the Brezhnev era.

Peskov's nostalgia for Brezhnev is echoed by many Russians. According to an opinion poll, 44 per cent of the Russian respondents saw Brezhnev's era as a positive period of development, either in its entirety or in part.¹ Many recall Russia's unquestioned superpower status, free education and healthcare – but blissfully overlook the fact that even in Moscow one could queue for hours for such luxury goods as onions. The Soviet propaganda machine seems to be working its magic even today: in a still highly popular comedy from the mid-1960s, a student lives in a fully equipped spacious flat by herself and looks like

¹ Levada Tsentr, 'Epohi v zhizni strany: Yeltsin, Gorbachev, Brezhnev', 26 January 2011. The cited opinion poll was carried out in December 2010.

a younger and cuter version of the stylish Jacqueline Kennedy. The table is replete with sausages, fruit and vegetables.²

However, in academic debates the Brezhnev years are seen as the calm before the storm. Towards the end of the Brezhnev regime, it became harder and harder to cover up the woeful state of affairs: a slowly declining economy, a badly functioning and corrupt political system, the ever-widening gap between ordinary citizens and the privileged members of the *nomenklatura*,³ growing losses in Afghanistan and the general depletion of resources internationally. The legitimacy of the system was no longer based on the belief system of communism nor on the charisma of its leader and hence the leadership was pressured into delivering things the system could hardly afford. According to a popular Soviet joke, Brezhnev's solution to a train that came to a halt was to draw the curtains and pretend that the train was still moving. Although only a tiny fraction of Soviet citizens were drawn towards outright dissidence, disillusionment was rife. When the repression was finally eased, this general disbelief abruptly surfaced and brought down the system much more quickly than anticipated.

Dual Russia forever?

Although very few Russians would claim that the current system performs well, the Putin system appears to be surprisingly persistent. Despite the common frustration with money-milking bureaucrats, lack of the rule of law and property rights, we are hardly likely to see major protests on the streets of Moscow – or in the provinces for that matter. Many Western experts are puzzled by the Russian middle class's apparent lack of concern about the poorly performing system and their lack of voice in Russia.

This state of affairs can be partly explained by the long legacy of 'dual Russia'. Robert Tucker – a highly renowned American Sovietologist and an expert on Russia – once came up with an explanatory concept

of dual Russia, denoting the critical psychological detachment of society from the state.⁴ According to him, the Russian masses traditionally exhibit a passive and submissive attitude towards the powerful elite who – in the absence of pressure from below – may rule the country as they wish. To most observers, this kind of society would appear to be stable, but Tucker, on the contrary, highlighted the inbuilt *instability* of dual Russia. When the masses are alienated from the regime, the legitimacy of the system is dangerously hollow.

One could argue that the persistence of the regime in Russia has traditionally been based mainly on repression and fear and/or the things it delivers to its citizens (or some thereof). Occasionally, the regime's legitimacy has been strengthened by the personal charisma of the leader or – particularly in the case of tsarist Russia – by the power of tradition.

Tragically, not even the post-Soviet Russia has been able to overcome the legacy of dual Russia. There have been the odd occasions when it seemed like dual Russia could be overcome: Yeltsin appealing to the masses in 1991 and the Putinmania of the early 2000s. For a while, Putin's personality and style of policy-making seemed to galvanize the nation – he was clearly the right man at the right time. He took advantage of this window of opportunity and eliminated the competition. During the Putin years, the gulf between the elite and the masses was cemented for years to come.

Furthermore, it seems that the dynamics of dual Russia are once again getting stronger. In a recent opinion poll, 41 per cent of the respondents (representing the whole Russian population) stated that the probability of Putin's presidential comeback does not arouse any kind of feelings in them either way.⁴ This result indicates serious levels of detachment from the once-admired 'national leader'. The charismatic legitimacy has evaporated.

In addition to the *longue durée* factor of dual Russia, the middle class acquiescence stems from the specific historical context of today's Russia: namely, the discouraging experiences of the 1990s.

2 Leonid Gaidai's film *Operation Y and Other Shurik's Adventures* (1965).

3 A bureaucratic elite that consisted of members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

4 Levada Tsentr, 'Vladimir Putin i ego tretiy srok', 7 October 2011.



Critics see Putin's extended tenure as a return to the Brezhnev era. The former Soviet leader, pictured here in a painting depicting a famous kiss between him and East German leader Eric Honecker, is seen as a symbol of stagnation. Photo: Deutsches Bundesarchiv.

The Russian public is not only disillusioned with the current regime but also – and much more, in fact – with the Western-promoted democratisation model. Likewise, the liberals – the so-called democrats like former prime minister Mikhail Kasyanov and former deputy prime minister Boris Nemtsov – have effectively turned into phantoms of the 1990s. In Russia they are commonly viewed, and perhaps correctly so, as being as corrupt as the current leaders.

The optimistic transition paradigm had its window of opportunity, but that was closed about a decade ago. No new coherent and concrete alternative models of positive democratic development have emerged as yet, and this naturally strengthens the appeal of acquiescence to Putin's autocracy. To date, Putin's 'power vertical' has penetrated almost every realm of Russian society and hence it is unlikely that competing models will appear in the near future either.

Voice or exit?

The appeal of protesting is also diluted by the viable option of exiting the country. Ivan Krastev – a political scientist and renowned European intellectual – has claimed that the openness of the borders is, in fact, one of the reasons for the persistence of Putin's regime. Krastev argues that "Comparing the outburst of reformist energy in the 1980s with the lack of such energy today makes me believe that, while the sealing of the borders destroyed Soviet com-

munist, the opening of the borders helps the new Russian authoritarianism to survive".⁵

Well-educated, middle-class Russians who are disillusioned with the system prefer to exit the country rather than start protesting against the system. This ties in with the experiences of the 1990s: the people who were optimistic and protested in the 1990s are, by now, exhausted and know from experience how difficult it is to change the Russian system – indeed, a lifetime may not be enough – and hence prefer the exit alternative to the voice strategy. As long as the exit option is not taken up by the masses, its availability eases the pressure for significant change inside Russia.

The people who are most likely to be disturbed by the corrupt, undemocratic system in today's Russia are the ones that are most ready and able to leave. A recent opinion poll vividly demonstrates the growing appeal of exit: 22 per cent of Russia's adult population would like to leave the country for good (the percentage is much higher among the well-educated urban youth). The change is significant compared to four years ago, when only 7 per cent of Russians were considering moving abroad.⁶

⁵ Ivan Krastev, 'Paradoxes of the New Authoritarianism', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 22, no. 2 (April 2011), pp. 14–15.

⁶ Opinion poll carried out by Levada Tsentr and cited in *The Economist*, 'Time to shove off', 10 September 2011.

Although the majority of the respondents are likely to stay in Russia in the end, the survey conveys a telling picture of the shift in the general mood in the country today. Most importantly – as a recent article in *The Economist* points out – the current “suitcase syndrome” in Russia cannot be explained by material factors. Many members of the urban Russian middle class have a higher material standard of living than their Western counterparts. Their desire to leave is caused primarily by frustration with the unfairness of the system.⁷

Looming decay

The voice option is also hard to pursue due to the fact that around half of those belonging to the so-called middle class are government officials. Protesting against the state can hardly be expected from those who are directly dependent on it. Russia has only a tiny *independent* middle class and their number does not seem to be on the rise. The corrupt and overly bureaucratic Russian environment is particularly hostile towards small and start-up businesses and the Soviet-style giant manufacturing enterprises continue to dominate the Russian economy.⁸ Even the super-rich business oligarchs generally owe their enormous wealth to shady deals with the government rather than their own creativity. All roads in Russia seem to lead to the Kremlin.

During the Putin and Medvedev years, corruption has risen to unbelievable proportions. For example, it has been estimated that construction firms involved in preparing Sochi for the 2014 Winter Olympics commonly pay kickbacks of more than fifty per cent. It seems that the greed and the instances of bribery are becoming increasingly grotesque. For instance, Sochi belongs to the Krasnodar region, whose governor’s 22-year-old niece owns a major stake in a huge pipe factory, a poultry plant and a number of other businesses. Elena Panfilova, head of Transparency International’s Russian office, has claimed that the increasing corruption stems from the general feeling of approaching collapse –

one has to grab everything one can as soon as one can.⁹

Another major problem (closely intertwined with corruption) that plays a part in any future scenario is Russia’s decaying infrastructure. The country’s basic infrastructure and industrial base was built during the Soviet era and not much has been done to it since then.¹⁰ The last few years have seen a serious blast in a coal mine (some 90 people killed), a turbine explosion at a hydro-electric dam (75 dead), the sinking of a tourist vessel (122 dead), several airplane crashes (the most recent ones are from June, July and September 2011, killing 43, 11 and 44 people respectively) as well as several major blackouts and gas explosions all over Russia.

Although the authorities have started to acknowledge the pattern of events and have pledged to allocate more funds to address the issue, the situation is hard to fix. The problem is simply massive: it permeates all industries, dams, roads, airports, high transmission lines, housing and utilities. And given the corruption in Russia, spending money is easy but achieving tangible results is very hard. The statistics are chilling: 1 km of road in Russia costs on average 12.9 million dollars (which is already high by international standards) and the Olympic road in Sochi cost up to 153 million dollars per km. All in all, the construction of new roads has been negligible in Russia during the 2000s; the government has not even succeeded in building a proper motorway between Moscow and St. Petersburg despite its unquestioned economic significance.¹¹

Something new brewing?

The persistence of the regime currently depends mainly on the elimination of competition and output legitimacy, meaning that the loyalty of the people needs to be ‘bought’ by offering something positive to the citizens. However, Russia’s future may turn out to be even gloomier than the present day: an omnipresent state, an aging leader, an infrastructure

7 *The Economist*, ‘Time to shove off’, 10 September 2011.

8 Only 10 to 15 per cent of Russia’s GDP comes from small businesses; in comparison, the same number is typically above 50 per cent in Western societies. Marshall I. Goldman, *Russia’s Middle Class Muddle*, *Current History*, October 2006, p. 323.

9 Julia Ioffe, ‘Net Impact’, *The New Yorker*, 4 April 2011.

10 Simon Shuster, ‘Living and Dying with Russia’s Soviet Legacy: Sinking Ships and Falling Planes’, *TIME Magazine*, 12 July 2011.

11 Simon Shuster, ‘Living and Dying with Russia’s Soviet Legacy: Sinking Ships and Falling Planes’, *TIME Magazine*, 12 July 2011.

in meltdown with increasing casualty numbers, corruption growing out of all proportion, and the likelihood of increasing elite struggles due to a shrinking kitty to be shared out amongst them. As the symptoms of systemic dysfunctionality grow more and more apparent and impact the everyday lives of more and more people, the hollow legitimacy of the system and its ruling elite may start to evaporate.

Will the shrinking number of ‘deliverables’ to the people finally lead to the destruction of dual Russia? Will Russians start demanding more from the state? The answer to these questions is bound to come from the younger generation and not from the discredited ‘democrats’ of the Yeltsin era.

A positive exponent of new thinking and acting is Alexey Navalny, a lawyer, blogger and anti-corruption activist, born in the mid-1970s. He skilfully uses social media to reveal the obscene abuses of corrupt officials, to get people involved in anti-corruption activities and to put pressure on the government. The tools that Navalny uses in his campaigning are new and innovative but the most novel thing of all seems to be his bold attitude. He openly scoffs at the lacklustre and over-used allegations coming from the corrupt ruling elite that he is working for the US and seems undaunted by the mighty authorities. He claims that in actual fact there is no master plan or well-designed repressive system in Russia, only a motley bunch of crooks unified under the portrait of Putin.¹² And most importantly, he claims that the system can be changed by ordinary, average Russians if they just refuse to put up with it and start acting together.

Navalny has risen to internet stardom both in Russia and internationally. He was even named Person of the Year in 2009 by the (foreign-owned) *Vedomosti* newspaper. But all this means little in a country as vast as Russia and whose media environment is so widely manipulated. A respected, independent polling agency, Levada Tsentr, carried out a Russian-wide opinion poll on Navalny in mid-April 2011 and found that his name said nothing to 93 per cent of the respondents.¹³

12 Julia Ioffe, ‘Net Impact’, *The New Yorker*, 4 April 2011.

13 Levada Tsentr, ‘Aleksyey Navalnogo znayut 6% rossiyan’, 6 May 2011.

Indeed, it would be a mistake to presume the quick downfall of dual Russia – a legacy that has endured for centuries. Because of the new openness, pragmatism and flexibility of the non-democratic political system in today’s Russia, it is likely to persist and prevail despite its evident and growing dysfunctionality. The Putin regime is weak enough not to be able to reform itself, yet simultaneously strong enough to prevent viable alternatives to its rule from gaining ground.

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