

The Putin System: An Investigation

by [Enzo Reale](#) (October 2019)



Faces of Russia, Boris Grigoriev, 1923

The vote for the renewal of the Duma (Parliament) in Moscow resulted in a relative surprise: the President party, United Russia, confirmed its absolute majority with 25 seats out of a total of 45 but lost majority in favor of the Communist Party (which grew from 5 to 13), the Social Democrats of Fair Russia

(3) and the traditional liberal group Yabloko (4). The interpretation of the result is ambivalent. On the one hand it seems that the Kremlin, after eliminating the opposition that really feared and supported the official candidates without too much conviction, has chosen to favor a greater plurality, trying to legitimize a vote heavily conditioned by the repressive context that preceded. Hence the success of an apparent opposition (above all that of the communists) easier to integrate and assimilate to the strategy of power. At the same time, however, it's fair to observe how the plea to the "smart vote" launched by the opponent Navalny a few days before the elections—in essence, vote anyone who is able to defeat the candidates of United Russia—has borne fruit, despite the bad mood initially generated in the ranks of a liberal dissent unwilling to choose, where necessary, communist candidates. Although it is unlikely that anything would really change, at least symbolically the boycott seems to have worked. In any case, it's been an electoral round worthy of study for the singular dynamics he introduced.

In the rest of the country, United Russia generally held positions, with some exceptions in the far east, where Zhirinovskiy nationalists prevailed. In all, several municipalities, 16 governors, the parliaments of 13 republics and provinces of the federation, 4 deputies of the state Duma were renewed.

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1. The Protests

But it was not the result of the Moscow elections that got the public's attention between July and August. It was, rather, a series of street protests against the decision of the electoral commission to exclude the main exponents of the liberal opposition, officially due to formal defects in the collection of the signatures needed to present the candidacies. From 2011-2012, Russia did not experience a wave of political activism of a size that was capable of shaking the centers of power and provoking a repressive response (e.g., the demonstrations of the Bolotnaya Square against the alleged fraud in the State Duma elections). In the last weeks the first sentences were announced: two to five years for seven activists accused of crimes of insubordination against the authorities (including, for example, touching the mask of a policeman or throwing irritating spray against the police), house arrest or acquittal for eight other defendants. Much less numerous than in Hong Kong, the Moscow demonstrators share some characteristic aspects with their Asian counterparts: they are young, they are mainly students, they show excellent qualities of organization and adaptation to the circumstances, interacting through an effective internal communication network. Their protests have a horizontal character with no defined leaders. In both cases, the initial claims have opened the door to general political demands directed against the national government.

If we thought only in quantitative terms, the game would be closed before starting: thirty thousand protesters on the key day of July 27th (which ended with a violent police repression and thousands of detentions), fifty thousand on August 10th,

against a sixty per cent support for Putin (in decline but always firmly in command). However, in politics, not only the numbers matter—and the first to know the numbers is the current President. Having initially underestimated the popular

anger against the cancellation of signatures, the Kremlin reacted to the protesting climax first by the official rhetoric according to which any organized dissent is attributable to unidentified “external



interferences,” then with the use of force and arrests. Both counteroffensives missed the objective, highlighting difficulties in interpreting the nature of the movement. On the one hand, the reference to the action of “foreign powers” and the risk of a return to institutional and social “chaos” of the 1990s is unlikely to take root in a generation of millennials that have not experienced Yeltsin’s reforms and the economic crisis of the first post-communist decade. On the other hand, the repressive action of the police and the judiciary seemed to have no clear logic, alternating between control tactics, massive detentions of protesters, targeted and repeated threats to political representatives more or less involved in protests (Sobol, Yashin, Galyamina, Zhdanov, Gudkov and the same Navalny), and releases and rearrests.

2. The Perspective of the Kremlin

It might be surprising that Putin was directly involved in a square-power dialectic arising from a local diatribe (the Moscow Duma is an organ with limited decision-making powers

and—comparatively—low political weight), that in theory could have been managed directly by the mayor of the capital, Sergei Sobyanin. But, as Alexander Baunov explains in a recent article for the *Carnegie Moscow Center*, not so much the participation in Moscow elections as the chain of command in Russia was at stake. The message is that no challenge to presidential power, which Putin identifies with the country's prosperity, will be tolerated. Hence the national dimension of the conflict. This is an essential step in understanding the Putin system. Why so much effort to clean up electoral processes from out-of-control variables or to guarantee the result? Not because the Kremlin believes in elections as a means of legitimacy but because he interprets them as a direct threat against the country. If Putin loses, Russia loses. That explains the need for securing the outcome, despite the already very limited cultural or national space available for political dissent.

Putin is de-politicizing Russian political life, through a certain amount of social control, partly based on improving living conditions and partly on fear of retaliation. This strategy also applies to institutions, where for some time now there has been a prevalence of technocrats with a more pragmatic and less ideological approach. This is not the same as the classic influence of *siloviks*. Today, the president's circle looks more like a company board, where he is the CEO, than the government of a nation. The loss of relevance of people like Vladislav Surkov, a proponent of the trendy concept of "sovereign democracy" (the "nationalization" of political elites), in favor of Volodin and Kiriyenko, more aseptic and therefore more reliable profiles, is one proof. The ambiguous relationship with United Russia, the Kremlin's reference party left to its fate without a renewal program, should also be read in this perspective. The emptying of the parliamentary dialectic makes the weight of political groups

already greatly reduced compared to Western experiences. However it is significant that many pro-Putin candidates in Moscow presented themselves as independent and not under the party's umbrella. In a de-politicized society, power does not depend on programs but on security services. At the same time, the centralization of decisions in an increasingly narrow circle risks compromising control over the whole country. Thus, while Putin loses contact with the periphery, governors and ministers work more to please the *tsar* or to comply with protocols than to make effective decisions. Centralization becomes arbitrariness. The bureaucracy tends to become rigid; the Putin system contains elements of degeneration.

It is no coincidence that the management of the response to the protests was criticized by some leading figures in the Russian political and economic landscape. Chemezov, general manager of the state-owned giant Rostec, denounced the distance between the ruling class and the population, Kudrin, Putin's eleven-year finance minister, and Karaganov, a political scientist of ancient militancy, criticized the excessive use of force and the current economic stagnation. Although no one thinks that a series of demonstrations and a destructured opposition (for objective and subjective reasons) may represent a risk for the stability of the system, the signal that the square sends goes far beyond the numerical strength of the protests. Thanks also to the material well-being achieved during Putin's first mandates and to the undeniable modernization of the country, the Russians are now looking to the West. The children of wealthy families study in London and Berlin, not in Beijing, the investors buy houses in Paris and Barcelona, professionals work with and for European companies, even organized crime always ends up choosing Europe. This natural tendency is on a collision course with the anti-Western and nationalist rhetoric that spreads with increasing vehemence from the Kremlin. Today, Russia still

relies on the man who gave it back a *raison d'être* after the Soviet failure and the uncertainty of post-communism, but one day this latent contradiction will likely emerge. In this sense, perhaps, Putin's position can be considered less solid than other top leaders of the Eurasian space.

3. The Nature of the Regime: (Dis)continuity, Memory, Identity

It seems a paradox but it isn't. The Putin generation—twenty-year-olds who have known stability, modernity, and relative well-being—is turning its back on its authoritative father. Let's start from a fact that even the most critical should acknowledge: in terms of personal freedom (economic, artistic, movement, self-determination, expression), the Russians have never enjoyed in all their history the possibilities that they enjoy today. Whether this happened thanks to Putin or in spite of Putin can be debated, but it's important to clear up a misconception: despite authoritarian involutions, the recurring reference to the Soviet regime is misleading and does not help to understand the current political and social reality of the country. It's self-evident that in the last twenty years, Russia—especially in large urban centers—has left the past behind. Short reminder: thanks to the favorable economic situation guaranteed by the increase in oil prices after the 1998 crisis, during Putin's first term the economy began to grow at a high rate. The market continued to be unstable but, in ten years, the gross domestic product doubled and the turbulences of the nineties were reabsorbed. Poverty was progressively reduced and life expectancy grew. In 2013, there was a first major economic contraction, along with a new fall in crude oil prices, but the structure held. The present time is characterized by large national projects, state investments, and structural improvement of the banking system. The medium-term objective is the growth and stabilization of

real wages, even if the official ones remain well below the European average. A general economic slowdown combined with a recent rather unpopular pension reform make the current phase one of the most problematic in Putin's management history. The ambitions clash with the reality of a GDP that corresponds to 2% of the world total, similar to Spain's. However, these street protests do not arise from economic issues. It is the urban middle class that demonstrates in the squares of Moscow with demands of a strictly political nature. What they are asking for is not an improvement in their material situation but a new social contract, a renewed pact between the ruling class and the population that will replace the one in force up to now, founded—as previously mentioned—on the separation between society and politics in exchange for growth and stability. The future of the Putin system depends on the ability to respond to these new demands.

But what kind of political regime applies to present-day Russia? *The Future is History* by Masha Gessen is probably the best recent book available on the subject. The only problem is that the author pushes an unnecessary hyperbole: to capture the essence of Putinism she uses the categories of totalitarianism, in search of a continuity between the Soviet past and the present. Through the category of *Homo Sovieticus*, whose persistence in the collective mentality she argues, Gessen concludes that Putin is reproducing some essential elements of the previous system: a *nomenklatura* that dominates the bureaucracy, a bureaucracy that controls society, a media apparatus aligned to power, a tendency towards militarization, and an unplanned but still “distributive” economy in terms of benefits and rewards. Recalling the conclusions of the sociologist Lev Gudkov, a process of imitation of totalitarian institutions with the more or less explicit complicity of the population would be underway in Russia. The hypothesis is suggestive but, in my

opinion, not convincing. Furthermore, to base it on the category of *Homo Sovieticus* presents certain risks. According to the famous definition of the father of Soviet sociology, Yuri Levada, the characteristics of *Homo Sovieticus* are obedience, servility, and submission. *Homo Sovieticus* blindly believes in state paternalism and renounces any space of personal independence (adapting this way to the society built around and above him while the regime in turn depends on this type of person to perpetuate itself). It's enough to read the magnificent collective fresco by Svetlana Aleksievic in her book *Secondhand Time* to realize that the definition was no longer valid, at least not completely, already in the last years of *perestroika* and that the concept of *Homo Sovieticus* had definitively dissolved in the general feeling of hope and fear of freedom of the Yeltsinian era. It's true that the sense of loss nourished in some sections of the population created a morbid attachment to the past but it was not so much an ideological as a psychological association with Soviet history. The gap left by the "end of a world" was filled by the advent of Putin. Although initially he may have been perceived as a passing figure, a simple link in the transitional chain, Putin ended up embodying in himself that need for security and order produced by the emptiness and confusion of the first post-communist decade. A Soviet-style, gray but pragmatic official (a former KGB officer), he concentrated in his person the nostalgic feeling of those who felt orphaned of the country in which they grew up and of the only system they had known, even though it was tragic and oppressive. On this basis he built his political career.

Various labels have been attached to the Putin system: illiberal democracy (political oxymoron), hybrid regime (democratic and totalitarian at the same time), post-communist mafia state (good for sociology, less for politics), electoral authoritarianism, just to name a few. All of them are

partially applicable but none completes the description. I'd call it an unfinished transition with continued authoritarian relapses. In an immense country that has never known democracy, which came out from seventy years of real socialism, perhaps we cannot ask for more. This does not exclude analysis and criticism. The number of political prisoners exceeds the figures of the the Gorbachev era (the final Soviet General Secretary). The Russian press retains certain margins of independence but the limits are often marked with blood. The judiciary responds to the political power. The police protect the state more than the citizens. The legal guarantees for personal and business protection are clearly insufficient. The political opposition is disjointed. Occasional protests are repressed or managed only to preserve the system. Meanwhile, from the Kremlin, apparently contradictory messages come: creation of "opponent" parties actually controlled by the government, support for European right-wing nationalists or populists, anti-American rhetoric, ideological proximity with ultra-conservatives by promoting the persecution of homosexuality. A global discourse that includes everything, aimed at building an across-the-board consensus. Putin, far from being a populist, has proved being able to use populist movements abroad and to influence Western public opinion. Twitter is a significant example: more and more users in Europe support the policies of the Kremlin, uncritically spreading its points of view and propaganda. It is a noteworthy phenomenon, not based on factual analysis but on an ideological bias against liberal democracies. Common elements of this army of "volunteers for Putin" are contempt for Ukraine, characterized according to a long-standing rhetoric as a fascist outpost and often an explicit nostalgia for the Soviet Union. Emblematic is the case of the anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact where the revisionist version released by the Russian Foreign Ministry has been reproduced on an international scale with a surprising level of coordination.

François Furet wrote about the end of the communist illusion that the Soviet Empire had been a superpower without having incarnated a civilization. His dissolution left nothing behind: neither principles, nor codes, nor institutions, not even a history. Also, present-day Russia seems to suffer from an identity crisis. The lack of a shared project apart from ideological opposition to the West and the constant feeling of isolation or exclusion. Putin, the redeemer of the wounded Russian pride, the strong man who officially brought the country back "to the center of the international scene," has never actually succeeded in removing it from a victimist logic. Indeed, he has nurtured it: he's been unable to offer the Russians a coherent strategy of self-affirmation outside their borders and—above all—to create a new narrative, an alternative Russian novel that replaces the totalitarian era and its ashes. What is missing is an idea of Russia for the 21st century, beyond the continuity of power and the centralization of fundamental decisions. But if I were to point to a decisive factor among those holding back Russia's democratic evolution, I'd dwell on the relationship with its recent history. In my opinion, the manipulation and removal of the past, both related to the political interests of the present, precisely define Putin's regime. From the Gulag to the Second World War, there is no historiographical subject that the government does not undertake to adapt to current circumstances and conveniences. This continuity starts from the dissolution of the Empire. Contrary to what happened in the satellite countries of Eastern Europe, the Soviet institutions were not dismantled but were instead automatically transformed into Russian institutions. After a period of initial opening, the government gradually began to restrict access to the archives, complicating scholars' research. The result is indisputable: a fossilized, agonizing, enslaved memory. Let's consider the footprints of the communist past still present in Russia (symbols and

monuments): far from being the evidence of a sincere acknowledgement of its own history—as it would be if the Russians had decided to preserve them at the end of a collective exercise of memory, analysis, judgment and reconciliation, which instead did not occur—the past survives in its most ambiguous forms precisely because no one among those who could have promoted this painful but necessary process (politicians, academics, historians, educators, officials) has ever really put it into question. Alexander Etkind, quoted by Gessen, has written about the “suicidal nature” of Soviet terror and its repercussions on historical memory. In his view the main issue is that, while Nazi Holocaust exterminated the Other, in the Soviet Union the victims and the perpetrators were part of the same families, the same ethnic and social groups. The self-inflicted character of Soviet terror made “cognitive learning” of what happened very difficult and justice and revenge on the executioners almost impossible.

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4. Russia Between Two Fires

The international position of Russia is a key issue that Putin seems far from solving. Poisoned inheritance of the lost centrality of the Soviet Union in its opposition to capitalist

democracy, the contradictions in the relationships with historical and emerging powers have been a constant in the long Russian transition.

We could date from the beginning of Putin's second presidential term the time when he turned from a possible perspective of integration with the West into a Russocentric vision. With the help of the erratic policies of Europe and the United



States, Russia understands that there is no common home from Lisbon to Vladivostok. And it reacts badly, beginning to think of itself as a country without friends, experiencing a growing feeling of isolation. Without a state ideology, victimhood prevails, and with it a certain desire for revenge. It begins an assertive, often aggressive, phase that leads to the war games in Georgia and Ukraine and to interventions in Syria and Latin America.

According to Dmitri Trenin, a former intelligence official and current director of the *Carnegie Moscow Center*, Putin's two biggest mistakes were the obsession with NATO's eastward expansion, completely unrelated to current military situations, and the belief that Ukraine could be incorporated into the Moscow-Eurasian project. The first error brings us back to what the sociologist Yuri Levada identified as one of the characteristics of Soviet society, namely self-isolation at a state level (creation of buffer zones) and at individual level (as protection from power). The second one derives from the undervaluation of the existential importance attributed by Ukrainian elites to their independence and their Eurocentrism.

Ukraine has always been the target of Soviet and Russian ambitions. Considered since the time of the Bolsheviks the cradle of the *kulaks* and nationalist separatism and subjected to the greatest suffering and intimidation, it continues today to be chastised for its insubordination. Moreover, the example of a democracy—albeit an unstable one—in which elections are regularly held and presidents freely chosen by the people, is certainly a thorn in the side for a Russia condemned to an autocratic political immobility.

In an interesting interview with a Ukrainian journalist, the head of *Echo of Moscow* radio station, Alexei Venediktov, said that Putin was not really going to take back Crimea. Crimea mobilized the nation, it was an essential ideological factor for its legitimacy, a gift to posterity. In this perspective, diplomatic and economic sanctions are limited factors: in Putin's vision, Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine are destined for reunification and Ukraine represents a simple territory, not even a state. The Ukrainian question is a symbol, a proxy war with Washington; an obsession, as Trenin writes.

But current Russia is not now an ideological power. Putin's anti-Western alliances maintain an ambiguous character, more symbolic than effective. It is true that the ideological battle against liberal democracies is intensifying and this could be interpreted as the prelude to actual hostility. Yet the formula according to which the Kremlin is neither an enemy nor an ally, reaffirmed recently by Macron in a rather instrumental way, keeps a certain validity—even if perhaps it is too late to make up for lost time and regain a great country that naturally looks to Europe. On the eastern front, Russia needs China and not the other way around: Putin is stuck in a geopolitical competition with the West and is looking for the necessary support. It is a relationship of

convenience, of suspicion rather than respect, a forced cohabitation but not an alliance, contrary to the nature and aspirations of the Russians. One wonders how Russia would be with a leader willing to find an agreement with Europe and the United States, respect the vital space of its neighbors, and avoid a policy of perpetual confrontation. Is there a real alternative to Putin? Not for now. What has become a mantra to justify the consolidation of power is actually also the result of this entrenchment, a vicious circle that someone will have to undo sooner or later without delivering the country to extremists of opposite political ideologies. For the answer, however, we will have to wait at least until 2024, surprises aside.

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