

THE PUTIN SYSTEM: RUSSIAN AUTHORITARIANISM TODAY

El sistema Putin: el autoritarismo ruso contemporáneo

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Abstract

The article explores the main trends that have characterized the re-emergence, formation and consolidation of an autocratic regime in post-Soviet Russia. We revisit the developments that led Vladimir Putin to the presidency of the country; framing these events as precursors of changes in formal structures (institutional and legal) and informal power mechanisms that define the current Russian political leadership. Finally, we formulated questions related to potential future scenarios involving such leadership.

Keywords: Putin, Russia, authoritarianism, political regime, political development.

Resumen

El artículo explora las principales tendencias que han caracterizado la re-emergencia, formación y consolidación de un régimen autocrático en la Rusia postsoviética. Revisitamos el desarrollo que condujo a Vladimir Putin a la presidencia del país; enmarcando esos eventos como precursores de los cambios en las estructuras formales (institucionales y legales) y los mecanismos de poder informal que definen el actual liderazgo político ruso. Y se formulan interrogantes relativas a los potenciales escenarios futuros que le implican.

Palabras clave: Putin, Rusia, autoritarismo, régimen político, desarrollo político

INTRODUCTION: CONTEMPORARY GLANCES AT RUSSIAN POLITICS*

The study of Russia's political evolution in the post-Soviet period (1991-present) has developed into a field of inquiry that can offer those interested in political transformation processes many important theoretical and practical insights. The passage from a post-totalitarian, single-party regime to an imperfect electoral democracy, followed by the regression to diverse forms of authoritarianism —events that span a mere 25 years— affords us uniquely useful insights into the relationship between democratization and de-democ-

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ratization in today's world. A number of authors have studied this period within the context of the more than 70 years of Soviet rule that preceded it (Zimmerman, 2013; Urban, Igronov & Mitrokhin, 1997), emphasizing the links between —and mutations of— their respective political elites and processes. Others have tackled Russia's transition process through comparisons to events in Eastern Europe as a whole (McFaul, 1993). Certain papers have focused specifically on the internal changes that took place from the collapse of the Soviet Union to the advent of the Putin administration (McFaul, Petrov & Ryabov, 2004). Finally, other authors have attempted to reveal enduring patterns of Russian political development in certain institutions (Tsygankov, 2014) and behaviors (Ledenova, 2013).

Analytical approaches have also oscillated between those who regard autocracy as an immutable trait and legacy of Russian history and culture —the *pessimists*—, those who conceive of it as a historical burden that socioeconomic development and global integration will gradually lift off the nation —the *optimists*— and those *realists* who, without ignoring the contextual factors that sustain or curtail it, address it as the result of actions by certain political actors who establish parameters of institutional development and practice suitable to anti-democratic purposes (Gelman, 2015).¹

My approach, though no doubt indebted to many of these contemporary studies on Russian politics, is based chiefly on the contributions made by authors who have analyzed autocracy from the perspective of the main conflicts and problems that this way of conceiving and exercising political power entails (Svolik, 2012). Such conflicts stem from the challenges inherent to sharing power in the absence of impartial arbitrators (within a context where the use of violence is constantly considered) and the need to control the population (through both coercion and consensus) in non-democratic societies. This interpretative approach, not unlike the new institutionalist school (Pierson, 2004), also conceives of autocracy as the outcome of deliberate decisions made by certain political actors at critical junctures.

Within specific institutional and cultural frameworks, these political actors seek to maximize their power before their opponents (and society as a whole), conceiving of political rivalries as a zero-sum game that demands the curbing of existing checks and balances and manipulating norms and institutions to this end (Gelman, 2015). Given their cumulative nature and political impact, these strategic maneuvers gradually curtail any possibility of reverting decisions made in the early stages of the process. It is on the basis of these assumptions that I set out to grasp the origins of Russia's current

¹ Such positions, as defined by Vladimir Gelman (2015), welcome different academic (and ideological) interpretations of decisive factors of Russian political development, all of them influenced by changing circumstances of the post-Soviet era. Without exhausting in this note the complexity and extent of the mentioned fields, we perceive the pessimistic outlook adopted by the works of particularly critical authors of the post-Yeltsin autocratic drift (such as the historian Anne Applebaum). The optimistic look in the eyes of some analysts (like the political scientist and former ambassador Michael McFaul) that, even with criticism, pondered democratization advancements and the effect of ties with the West in the period before the rise of Putin. For a realistic perspective, Vladimir Gelman's work is a good example.

regime. Though I haven't ignored its links to the Soviet era, I have focused primarily on the events spanning the decade prior to the rise of Putin, that is the Yeltsin era.

FAILED DEMOCRATIZATION

Different authors agree that the Boris Yeltsin administration (1991-1999) laid the foundations of a form of government that, while meeting the basic standards of electoral democracy, did not attain the status of a solid liberal democracy. In practice—and particularly as of 1993—this leadership evinced the traits of a delegative democracy, a concept popularized by the work of Guillermo O'Donnell. For Lilia Shevtsova (2015, 177). The imitation of Western institutions and norms, the emergence of a rentier and purchasing class and the limited acceptance of political pluralism allowed for an autocratic form of power—typical of Russian politics—to survive the collapse of the Soviet Union without having to rely on any other democratic credentials.

Without a doubt, this point of departure helps explain some subsequent developments. Once the heart of the Soviet empire, the strength of the communist political system—its decades-long influence on different strata of Russian society and culture—made Russia's transition an arduous and complex process (McFaul, 1993). Several authors (Tsygankov, 2014; Gelman, 2015) have suggested that the complexity of this triple transition—from a world superpower to a nation state, from a command to a market economy and from a single-party autocracy to a precarious democracy—had a powerful impact on the birth of the new, post-Soviet order, within the context of separatist conflicts and inter-ethnic tensions. This process, they claim, traced a number of axes—linked to attitudes towards market reforms, the restructuring of State power and the methods used to implement both processes—which can serve to explain the postures assumed by political actors and the Russian people as a whole (McFaul, 1993:66).

Russia's was a polarized transition that witnessed the emergence of political parties devoid of popular support. These were for the most part headed by leaders from the old regime, who found themselves involved in elections characterized by hostile rivalries. A political line based on State power and loyalty to its bureaucracies, precarious representative mechanisms (embodied by individuals, in the absence of strong parties) and high levels of apathy and depoliticization among citizens characterized the post-communist regime since the early stages of the transition process.² Two years after the start of this transition, experts were already stressing the absence of a solid consensus regarding the superiority of democracy as a political order, and warning that its potential enemies—former members of the Soviet *nomenklatura*—remained active within Russia's State and society, wielding sufficient resources to mobilize people against the new system (McFaul, 1993:92).

In the last quarter of 1993, when the Duma was violently dissolved and the new (and still effective) Constitution was approved to grant broad veto and legislative powers to

² This is support more than two decades after by different barometers, especially those of the Levada Center surveys.

the president, Russia's young democratic order witnessed a resolute change of course towards de-democratization, in the form of an emerging delegative democracy (Urban, Igronov & Mitrokhin, 1997). While this managed to stabilize political affairs—reducing the risk of social upheaval—and the right to elect high government officials and to exercise certain civil liberties (such as freedom of expression, assembly and demonstration) were maintained, the weakness of the party system, the lack of strong checks on executive power and the influence of big media outlets led to a state of affairs that some authors described as “neither democracy nor dictatorship” (McFaul, Petrov, Ryabov; 2004). The expansion of an *ad hoc* decision-making apparatus, the issuing of presidential decrees and the appointment of loyal officials within the Supreme Court and Federation Council (the upper house of the Russian legislature) consolidated a style of political practice based on control over institutions and the usufruct of State power mechanisms.

The 1996 presidential elections, held in an atmosphere of economic crisis, growing inequality, lack of public safety and corruption scandals, resulted in a second victory for Boris Yeltsin, who enjoyed the support of powerful television broadcasters and Russian oligarchs, made extensive use of State resources for his electoral campaign and ultimately relied on financial and political backing from the West. Despite these imbalances (which make it impossible to regard the elections as free and fair), the process did involve contention among different political platforms and a communist opposition with considerable power within the legislature and local governments. That said, the uncertainty regarding their outcome made these the last truly competitive elections seen in post-Soviet Russia.

In the absence of a foundational consensus, such as a national round table or a democratic (rather than presidentialist) constitution, the winning, Yeltsin-led coalition had very few incentives to undertake the profound democratization of Russian politics during the 1990s. Russian society had looked upon the agenda of democratization as a means of attaining the prosperity associated with Western-styled market economies. This prosperity not only failed to arrive but also retreated further from reach (as several socioeconomic indicators from the period reveal), making citizens lose interest in politics and prompting massive skepticism regarding the true benefits of democracy (Gelman, 2015). Though rifts within the elites, the weakness of the State and the priority given to neoliberal reforms prevented the consolidation of a clearly authoritarian regime; the passivity of citizens with respect to public affairs—which allowed regional powers to manipulate social unrest and mobilize it against the central government—cemented a kind of “resigned acceptance” of that precarious order (Gelman, 2015). Within the elite and system, this opened the door to a leadership moved by a clear interest in rebuilding an autocratic model of government.

The debate about the nature of and specific forms adopted by Russia's current autocratic regime³ encompasses a broad range of viewpoints. For some authors (Tsygankov, Zimmerman, Shevtsova), autocracy remains a central element of Russian political history. Periodically taking on the form of a strong, centralized, one-person government capable of controlling the nation's human and material resources and of developing a religion linked to the State and nationalist ideology to respond to foreign threats, the challenges presented by domestic elites and the demands for security, redistribution and modernization coming from society (Tsygankov, 2014). In Russian political history, Shevtsova (2015) identifies the persistence and refashioning of a system of one-person, militaristic and imperial rule capable of rallying extensive human and material resources.

According to other authors, the concentration of power that characterizes autocracy does not stem from alleged historical or cultural proclivities, but rather emerged during the transition process as a kind of *Thermidor* (McFaul, Petrov, Ryabov; 2004) seeking the restoration of social order and State control, as a result of decisions made by the relevant political actors and thanks to the widespread passivity of the population (Gelman, 2015). Russia's post-Yeltsin regime has also been described as a form of *semi-authoritarianism* and *patronal presidentialism* (Greene, 2014), *hybrid authoritarianism* (Gelman, 2015), and *competitive authoritarianism* drifting towards full-fledged *hegemonic authoritarianism* (Zimmerman, 2014).⁴

Though I recognize the many insights afforded by this debate, I believe that, in general terms and until recently (as recently as 2014, perhaps), Russian autocracy has rather behaved like a member of the *competitive authoritarianism* family, an eminently civilian form of government where democratic institutions (elections) formally operate as the main route to power but the government possesses —and employs— a series of

³ Here, I am using the term “regime” —understood as the series of institutions and rules that define the ways in which political power is accessed, practiced, ratified and/or abandoned— in a more specific manner, distinct from the broad(ened) notion of “system,” used by authors such as Shevtsova (2015) or Ledeneva (2013) to account for the networks of interests, traditions, values and behaviors which sustain and frame power phenomena within the confines of Russian society. In this connection, I concur with Shevtsova (2015, 177) in her definition of the Putin regime as the *political engine* of Russia's current system, characterized by a structure of *vertical power* and *manual control* over the political agenda. For a well-documented study dealing with the emergence and consolidation of this political model, see *The Putin System*, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pioJjp16eVk>.

⁴ For Zimmerman (2014), the Russian model —which he describes as a modernized version of the Soviet system— combines modern elements (such as unregulated sources of information, respect towards certain citizen privacy rights and others) with traditional elements of autocracy— a unipersonal electorate sustained by a small elite that controls the armed forces, a quasi-monopoly over the media and clientelism. According to Gelman (2015), the regime maintains a Soviet-styled power monopoly (a non-competitive political structure and a State-controlled economy) without having to endure the limitations of this model, thanks to its insertion in the global order, the existence of a market economy and the maintenance of electoral legitimacy, operating on the basis of the new rationality —an interest in accumulation and consumption (Ledeneva, 2013)— characteristic of post-communist Russia.

resources (rigged elections, privileged access to the media, the abuse of public resources, certain forms of violence, informal mechanisms that ensure successions within the leadership and the mobilization of supporters), directing these against the opposition to make the playing field uneven to its benefit (Levitsky & Way, 2013:3-36). Whatever viewpoint we adopt, it proves useful to locate the emergence and characteristics of Putin's autocratic government within the sequence of political regimes that Russia has had in the post-Soviet period. This is attempted in the table below, where three types of political regimes are presented. These categories should not be confounded with the specific performance, or the temporal boundaries, that characterized these orders under the concrete conditions of the Eurasian country.

TABLE I

	Electoral/ Liberal Democracy	Competitive/Electoral Authoritarianism	Hegemonic/Full Authoritarianism
Institutions and electoral processes	Respected (despite existing imbalances)	In place but systematically neglected or used to advance the interests of pro-government forces	Under strict government control, or reduced to a mere facade used to legitimate the regime
Status of the opposition	Competes with government forces on relatively equal footing	Authorized by law but curtailed through abuses by government forces	Severely restricted, harassed or forced into exile
Degree of electoral uncertainty	High	Lower than that of liberal democracy, higher than that of hegemonic authoritarianism	Low
Size of electorate/	Large, based on universal suffrage/	Large, based on universal suffrage/	Large. Universal suffrage is maintained only formally./
Role of selectorate	Electorate and selectorate are one and the same	Selectorate plays active role in political processes	Selectorate plays a decisive role in political processes
Period	1991-2000, showing signs of decline as of 1996	2000-2016, showing clear signs of decline from 2012	Some features of hegemonic authoritarianism are advancing from 2014; to be confirmed as a <i>path dependent</i> track during the next (2018) electoral process

Source: Table prepared by the author using data from McFaul, Petrov & Ryabov, 2004; Zimmerman, 2014 and Gelman, 2015.

Under the regime, fading elements of democracy, such as the holding of elections and the exercise of certain individual rights, are maintained. This is coupled with the strengthening of a centralized power focused on the figure of Vladimir Putin, which dominates political affairs at the regional and local levels (under plenipotentiary representatives appointed from Moscow and subordinate to most of mayor's offices) and monopolizes key political and administrative decisions. Safeguarded by security and defense services (given a high priority within the State apparatus), the regime maintains decisive control over most of the mass media, a good part of the economy (particularly the hydrocarbons and defense industries) and a broad section of the workforce within State companies (which remains politically dependent and easy to mobilize). The model's shortcomings include the bureaucracy's inefficiency and high levels of corruption, veiled competition among interest groups that seek greater access to profits within the State apparatus and an inability to implement modernizing reforms (even within an authoritarian framework).

This autocratic regime combines institutional elements —increasingly powerful State mechanisms for coercion and cooption— with non-institutional forms of governance. Under the first category, the system is beginning to reinstitute practices from the Soviet era, such as the cadre system, administrative and police measures for the management of dissent, and presidentialist, corporatist and conspiratorial methods for the development and implementation of State policies. All these practices are set in motion under the president's "manual control" and within the context of the "Power Vertical." Amplifying the institutional deficits of the State, Russia's network-governance mechanisms, woven concentrically around the figure of the president (who remains their gravitational center) and made up of his inner circle, sectors of the State bureaucracy and regional party bosses (appointed on the basis of kinship, place of origin and work background), serve to mobilize followers and cadres, guaranteeing loyalty to the government and the reproduction of the regime (Ledeneva, 2013).

The fundamental elements of this regime were consolidated towards the end of Putin's first term in office (2004), all but depriving social actors of any possibility of contesting the president's power. Between 1999 and 2002, Russia's official party —first named *Unity* and later *United Russia*— came to control most of the seats in the State Duma. This was achieved through a timely alliance with communists and liberals, who marginalized the two chief political forces at the elections and plenary and, by securing legislative control, offered the president's initiatives decisive support. Thanks to this, Putin's party was able to pass legislation in different areas unchecked, to the detriment of representational mechanisms and parliamentary autonomy (in 2001, as way of an example, a new law would prohibit the founding of regional parties).⁵

The resulting party system annulled all means of establishing a real opposition in the country. As a non-ideological party-in-power centered on the president, *United Russia*

⁵ Some perspectives present it as a logical measure to preventing a balkanization process. From these points of view, in the late 90s the country was in serious danger of imploding and breaking into pieces. This scenario —feared by the Russian political class— was the cause of Putin's recentralization.

was to co-exist with a loyal opposition (as represented, for instance, by the avowedly social-democratic *Fair Russia*), undertaking actions that ranged from managing political competition, monitoring the behavior and demands of elites and common citizens, recruiting and promoting cadres and buffering social pressures capable of affecting the president to reducing the use of violence by the State.

Territorial powers were centralized during Putin's first term (2000-2004) through the creation of seven federal districts controlled by personal envoys from the president (who regained control over the budget and security organs), coupled with the appointment of like-minded officials to the Federation Council. New governors would cease to be elected and begin to be appointed by the president and confirmed by local parliaments (controlled by a pro-government majority). Following a meeting held in the president's dacha in June of 2000, the government devised a pact with the business sector which secured State monopoly over the country's political agenda, in exchange for protection for private initiative and privileged access to the nation's newly reorganized markets and to State resources and contracts.

The new consensus handed down from the top to replace the tacit pact of the Yeltsin era entailed a series of tacit rules: contesting the president's power became taboo for the political and business elite, and the latter would enjoy protection and privileges in exchange for leaving the State's virtual power monopoly unchallenged. Within this new order, the informal rules became as important as—or perhaps more important than—the formal ones. The term “dictatorship of law”—understood as redoubled interference by justice and police organs in public affairs—came to replace the traditional notion of *rule of law*, and “managed democracy” took the place of political pluralism.

The notion of “managed democracy”—introduced by Putin government propagandists and ideologues headed by V. Surkov—has been interpreted in different ways. According to the official discourse, it is an attempt to develop an idea of democracy suited to Russia's specific conditions. Numerous authors have identified it as the name assumed by a semi-authoritarian regime that places restrictions on political pluralism and maintains a degree of (limited) political competition, maximizing State control over society (Tsygankov, 2014). Others define it as a form of authoritarian reshaping of democratic practices which retains a certain degree of respect for its formal rules (Mc Faul, Petrov & Ryabov, 2004). But even a sympathetic take on the concept (Tsygankov, 2014) acknowledges that its mechanisms—which disqualify certain candidates and coopt and intimidate opponents—come at a significant cost to the nation's political development.

While presenting a number of authoritarian features, Russia's political system (still) allows for the existence of a public sphere where individuals may access and divulge information and opinions may be expressed. In contrast to the ills of the Soviet regime, characterized by previous censorship and simulated loyalties at both private and collective levels, in Putin's Russia common citizens and poll-takers systematically offer us data that reveal popular perceptions on the country's affairs.

Contrasting these data with Russia's political situation could not be more revealing. Studies conducted by the prestigious Levada Center (see Table 2) reveal that the majority

of Russian citizens support the president, reinforcing his central role within the nation's institutions and political culture. From 2013 to 2015, Putin enjoyed high confidence ratings, which went from 55 to 80% of all citizens polled. In contrast, those who had only some confidence in their leader went from 30% (2013) to 11% (2015) of the population, and those who distrusted the president accounted for a mere 10% of those surveyed last year.

The Orthodox Church, the defense and security forces and the central government—all key institutions within Russia's vertical and authoritarian power structure—also enjoy high approval ratings. Representational institutions and those that citizens interact with or are directly involved in on a daily basis—including trade unions and police forces—have witnessed lower approval.

TABLE 2. STATE AND EVOLUTION OF INSTITUTIONAL TRUST IN RUSSIA (2013-2015)

	Fully trust			Partially trust			Not at all trust			It's difficult to say		
	2013	2014	2015	2013	2014	2015	2013	2014	2015	2013	2014	2015
The president	55	79	80	30	13	11	12	4	7	4	4	3
The army	43	53	64	34	30	21	13	8	8	10	8	8
The church, religious organizations	48	54	53	25	20	22	10	7	9	17	19	17
Security agencies	36	46	50	32	32	25	14	9	11	18	14	15
The government	30	46	45	39	35	32	25	10	17	6	8	7
The Federation Council	24	39	40	39	35	33	22	10	14	15	16	13
The State Duma	25	37	40	44	42	36	26	14	17	5	8	6
Regional, republican authorities	32	35	38	40	41	35	21	15	20	7	10	8
The prosecutor's office	26	32	37	41	40	33	18	15	14	15	13	16
The press, radio, television	24	36	34	50	40	41	19	14	15	8	11	9
Local, municipal authorities	27	27	32	42	43	37	26	20	24	6	10	7
The courts	21	26	29	44	45	37	22	17	20	13	12	15
The police	18	21	29	46	49	43	27	22	19	9	9	9
Trade unions	18	28	24	34	27	27	26	20	22	23	25	27
Political parties	12	18	20	46	49	39	33	23	27	10	11	14

Source: <http://www.levada.ru/eng/institutional-trust>

With respect to the nature, evolution and aims of the political regime (<http://www.levada.ru/eng/political-regime-o>), while more or less continuous and generalized support for democracy was maintained from 2005 to 2015, the number of those who believe the

regime is becoming more autocratic or that it could regress to Soviet practices grew as well. Similarly, though Russians formally support the holding of elections and regard it as one of the elements of democracy, the number of those who consider that the aim of this system ought to be overcoming social or economic problems is notable. By comparison, the number of citizens who emphasize the need for greater social control over the government and for guarantees on rights liberties is markedly small.

From 1998 to 2015, the number of Russian citizens who believed that the establishment of a political system different from Western democracy, the Soviet regime or the old imperial order would be desirable also practically doubled (<http://www.levada.ru/eng/democracy-todays-russia>). This opinion is congruous with attempts by Kremlin ideologues and propagandists to erect a “Russian-styled” political system, governed by notions such as “sovereign democracy.” These widespread opinions appear to explain, in part, the legitimacy and stability that the Putin system enjoys today.

The attitude towards power evinced by citizens is intimately linked to growing official control over the media and the use of the latter as a means of spreading nationalist and pro-government propaganda. Under Putin, the gradual process of curtailing and domesticating pluralism within Russia’s public sphere (Chebankova, 2011) advanced to the point that, in the first quarter of 2014, the last television channel —aired on cable throughout the country— offering critical perspectives and information on the government was taken off the air (Greene, 2015). Even though, as Becker (2014) and Liman (2014) point out, the press under Putin differs considerably from the Soviet one —privileging cooption over previous censorship and tolerating the existence of public and critical spaces— the majority of Russians obtain their information from television and trust State discourse. If we add the fact that, during Putin’s second term, the government has taken an increasingly authoritarian turn —replacing editors and changing editorial lines in news agencies such as Novosti— the process of developing a consensus around the advanced policies becomes even more evident.⁶

Medvedev’s presidency (2008-2012), which followed Putin’s two consecutive terms in office (2000-2008) —the period in which the foundations of Russia’s new autocracy were laid—, has been the object of varying assessments. For some authors (Tsygankov, 2014), Medvedev attempted to strike a healthier balance between the more liberal and like-minded technocrats within the elite and members of the security apparatus loyal to Putin (then the powerful Prime Minister), through a moderate reformism (seeking an economy less dependent on hydrocarbons and focused on innovation and new technologies, as well as a freer political system and improved relations with the West), capable of attracting the middle classes.⁷ For others (Gelman, 2015), Medvedev simply

⁶ According to the Levada Center, 59% of Russians trust the information they receive through television fully or considerably, while 37% trust information obtained from the Internet (<http://www.levada.ru/eng/trust-mass-media>).

⁷ Attempts at generating public debate and government programs aimed at modernizing the country, made by the Institute for Contemporary Development between 2010 and 2011 with government support, yielded few practical results. In this connection, see the studies published in 2010 (<http://www.levada.ru/eng/contemporary-development>).

revealed the limits of authoritarian modernization —which is limited to the sphere of the economy and, to a lesser extent, to public administration, undertaking no political liberalization—, confusing the bureaucracy and raising false expectations among citizens with its rhetoric of liberalization. The practical result of this presidency was a constitutional reform that extended Russia’s presidential and parliamentary terms and strengthened the elite in power.

In September of 2011, with the consent of a submissive Medvedev, Putin announced his return to the presidential race. It was supported by previous constitutional reform that changed the four year terms into six year terms, as well as the possibility of leaving office and then after an idle period, running for election again for a third term. Though the stability and political structures he had built in the course of nearly 12 years were then in his favor, the response of a significant part of the population would shake the foundations —at least momentarily— of Putin’s hegemony, opening the door to a new and more authoritarian stage of the regime.

POLITICAL DECAY⁸

The stability of electoral or hybrid authoritarian regimes depends on a number of factors. On the one hand, these must strike a delicate balance between different political tools in order to guarantee the control, manipulation, repression and satisfaction of the populace (Gelman, 2015). On the other, they must somehow overcome the problem surrounding the leadership’s succession, such that the head of State does not degrade the regime to the status of an *established autocracy* (monopolizing power mechanisms by establishing a one-person rule) and a balance between the leader and his allies in the power coalition is attained, as under a *contested autocracy*. Ultimately, this affords the regime greater stability and more robust policies (Svolik, 2012).

In this connection, between 2011 and 2012, the succession process of Russia’s leadership evinced the Achilles’s heel of most authoritarian regimes, which tend to oscillate between a tendency to eliminate all constitutional restrictions on the reelection —and powers— of the autocrat and the establishment of mechanisms that guarantee an orderly and loyal succession (Gelman, 2015:104-105). At this point in time, the frustration felt by a segment of the population —chiefly belonging to the urban middle and lower classes—, prompted by problems of corruption and the news of Putin’s return to the presidency, brought social protest back onto Russia’s public stage.

insor-russia.ru/files/INSOR%20Russia%20in%20the%2021st%20century_ENG.pdf) and 2011 (http://www.insor-russia.ru/files/INSOR_Attaining_the_Future_final.pdf).

⁸ Here, I employ the terms “political decay” not as a synonym of the loss of political control or of economic crisis, but in the sense given it by Fukuyama (2014), who identifies the State’s declining capacities —affected by neopatrimonialism, the backwardness of bureaucracy and the overall poor quality of public policies—, as well as the undermining of the rule of law and the deficit of democratic accounting practices, as symptoms of regression in the political development of a modern nation.

The cycle of protests witnessed from December 2011 to May 2012 in major Russian cities —Moscow, St. Petersburg and Yekaterinburg— secured unprecedented levels of support (from as much as 30% of the population), gathering and mobilizing a broad range of political currents (liberals, left-wingers and nationalists), different social actors (bloggers and human rights activists) and varying occupational categories (government officials, professionals and students), all of whom joined voices to demand fair elections and condemn the party in power (Tsygankov, 2014). This critical moment witnessed a broad generational renewal among social activists and greater creativity in the tactics of the opposition, both in the virtual world —the Internet— and the real one —the streets. At the electoral level, this spelled defeat for *United Russia*, which saw a dramatic decrease in the number of seats held at the Duma (from 450 to 238) after securing a mere 49% of the votes. It also served to undermine the party's capacity to reform the constitution and Putin's chance at securing the kind of sweeping victory he enjoyed in 2008 (Zimmerman, 2014).

The State's response to these protests initially remained within the parameters that define a *managed democracy*, encompassing the promise of reforms, the discrediting, isolation and imprisonment of opposition leaders, the cooption of moderates and the mobilization of public functionaries and other actors from the government's social bases through rallies and media campaigns. After regaining his popularity, Putin was elected on March 2012 with 60% of the votes, setting in motion a series of apparently liberalizing measures. These included simplifying the requirements for the registration of new political parties, re-establishing elections for governors and meeting with leaders of the non-parliamentary opposition.

As of the "new" government's first year in power, however, the Kremlin began to adopt tougher policies in a number of sensitive areas. The Duma was presented with a bill —ultimately approved— to restrict the work of NGOs, particularly those that receive foreign funds and deal with politically sensitive issues, such as human rights, government transparency and electoral oversight. From this moment, several foreign NGO's (as National Endowment for Democracy) were expelled from Russia and also local counterparts (as Memorial center) saw their activities and programs restricted or closed. With the support of a conservative social majority (supportive of traditional values and convinced that the State should play a more significant role at home and abroad), gay rights demonstrations were repressed and described as a political affront on religious values.

Since 2014, against the backdrop of the conflict with the Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, the regime appears to be moving from hybrid to hegemonic authoritarianism, stepping up its attacks on members of the opposition, placing greater restrictions on critical and autonomous media and replacing the capitalist modernization model —caught sight of in the early Putin and Medvedev administrations— with the growing militarization of the economy, society and the political agenda (Gelman, 2015:103). Recent studies (<http://www.levada.ru/eng/protest-activism>) reveal that notably low numbers (below 20%) of citizens support or approve of participating in, or regard as feasible and desirable to take part in, demonstrations in order to defend their rights or living conditions.

Russian foreign politics⁹ has shown more pronounced aggressiveness and anti-Western rhetoric on both the European arena and the Middle East.¹⁰ In the Syrian crisis, the deployment of air and naval contingents and military forces and the country's combat efficacy tilted the balance, at least temporarily, in favor of Al Assad's besieged government. Moscow has shown muscle and managed to be recognized as a heavyweight player (with veto power) in efforts to overcome the Syrian crisis. The human and material expenditures behind such notable successes have yielded considerable profits. At the regional level, this has brought back the bipolar crisis management schemes that existed and operated during the Cold War.

This has gone hand in hand with an increase in defense spending. Military prowess has always been a key element of Russian domestic and foreign policy. In a nation forged under constant threat of foreign invasion—from the Mongols and Teutonic knights to Hitler's Wehrmacht—the presence of military forces in government organs and mechanisms, power elites and political culture has been a constant, turning the soldier into the official archetype of the patriot and an alternative to the democratic and civilian subject.

In the last years of the Putin administration, the Russian armed forces have been professionalized and modernized in striking ways. A rearmament program (effective until 2020) envisages an increase in units of high combat capacity, the expansion of airlift troops, the creation of new arctic brigades and the resurrection of the Guard's well-known armored divisions. The percentage of modern war equipment used by air, sea and land troops is probably around 70%. These rearmament designs include as many as a million armed men, 2 300 Armata tanks, 1 200 new planes and helicopters, 50 surface ships (including at least one aircraft carrier) and 28 attack and strategic ballistic missile submarines, all of them backed by around a hundred spy, commando and communication satellites—decisive in the wars of the 21st century.

Without a doubt, a country of Russia's size and natural resources requires modern and mobile troops equipped with high-tech armaments to dissuade its powerful Asian

⁹ Following the collapse of the USSR, Russia inherited a good part of the territory, population, productive resources and military potential of the Soviet empire and retained a number of key features of the former superpower's international stance and status: its nuclear arsenal (coupled with its aircraft carriers, submarines and missiles) and its permanent seat at the UN Security Council, among other things. The (geo)political identity crisis of the (re)nascent Russian State, however, prevented the country from attaining an international stance that was congruous with its true potential. In the diplomatic arena, as in areas of political economy and the world of ideas, Russia's elite and society became divided into apparently irreconcilable postures: the *Atlanticists*, seduced by the idea of a liberal Russia inscribed in the West (including its political, financial and collective security institutions) and the *Eurasianists*, clinging to a belief in the uniqueness of Russian history, society and civilization (organized around a powerful State and a conservative tradition). The former were a dominant force during the better part of Yeltsin's term, while the latter have gained ground in the Putin era. For a suggestive glance at the links between Putin elites, the domestic political agenda and Russia's foreign policy, see Kaczmarek, 2014.

¹⁰ This new course has been accompanied by intense propaganda campaigns based on the perception, held by broad sectors of Russia's elite and population, that the West has hostile intentions towards the country. In this connection, see the survey conducted by the Levada Center (<http://www.levada.ru/eng/russia-west-relations>).

and Western neighbors. Coupled with the renewed aggressiveness of Russian foreign policy, the country's growing authoritarianism and decreasing military spending in Europe, however, these rearmament impulses are setting off alarms at several capitals of the old continent and among Russian democrats.

All of this points to complex social and political scenarios in Russia's future. Even analysts sympathetic to Kremlin policy acknowledge the current model's institutional inability to accommodate the social and political demands of a society as complex as Russia's. The dominant party, its leadership and the opposition authorized by the Kremlin show themselves incapable of fulfilling their roles. Coupled with an eventual increase in repression and more intense harassment of the radical opposition, this could lead to future protests and authoritarian solutions. For some authors (Tsygankov, 2014:164), there are now greater chances of a regression to a one-party system centered on a single leader, sustained by informal norms and incapable of overcoming Russia's institutional problems and addressing or accommodating the demands of the population.

From a reformist perspective, one challenge facing President Putin could be that of establishing, within the framework of his present administration, a series of rules that will allow for the transfer of his personal power.¹¹ These rules could be coupled with the establishment of a two-party system that can reflect both the conservative and liberal postures found among the political class (Tsygankov, 2014:163-165), offer the middle classes and excluded opposition an opportunity to participate in government affairs and replace the current presidentialist logic with a more institutional and stable structure.¹² The establishment of long (10-year) presidential terms and the nomination of representatives of the elite at the primaries, prior to their participation in any national electoral race, as well as the opening of regional legislatures and the Federation Council to electoral competition, has been proposed as a means to achieve this. This has been suggested in the understanding that a *managed democracy* that allows for pluralism and a strong State can complement one another—the former providing legitimacy and the second stability, while both interact to handle social tensions and foster political development (Tsygankov, 2014).

There are very few signs, however, suggesting that Russian politics will head down this promising path in the coming years. While Shevtsova (2015) recognizes that a post-communist society lacking a cohesive and coherent ideology isn't likely to regress to levels of Stalinist militarization, isolation and dictatorship for which neither the Russian elites nor society are prepared, Gelman (2015) describes a process of *stabilization* within the framework of electoral authoritarianism (combining isolated acts of repression

¹¹ We must bear in mind that, from 1946 to 2008, two thirds of all autocrats have been removed from power by the actions of allies (Svolik, 2012:5). This reveals both the unstableness of personalist autocracies and the way violence is constantly employed as a last resort to resolve intra-elite conflicts in authoritarian environments.

¹² Svolik (2012) has pointed out that authoritarian regimes can function effectively if they can manage to establish a system for the hierarchical allotment of goods and services, exercise political control over regime members and employ recruitment and repression mechanisms selectively. To date, *United Russia* has not met these criteria.

against members of the opposition, modest concessions to parties and elections, neopatrimonialism and precarious public policies) or the *consolidation of hegemonic authoritarianism* (comprising greater securitization and personalization, a new constitution that lifts restrictions on the president and curtails freedoms more thoroughly) as the two most probable scenarios Russia could witness in the immediate future. Andrei Kolesnikov (2015) alerts us to the contrast existing between the government's proven tactical capacity to impose its agenda on the opposition and the inability of the government elite (subservient to the leader and hostile to change) to think strategically and advance the administrative and governance reforms that the country needs. In the growing power of the president's figure and the country's militarization and economic difficulties, Green (2015) identifies a toughening of the regime that tilts the ambiguous balance between democracy and authoritarianism struck in the post-Soviet period towards the latter.

Alternative scenarios, such as the sudden *collapse of the regime*—highly unlikely, given the elite's cohesion and the public's depoliticization¹³ or its *gradual democratization*—requiring a pro-democracy consensus within the elite and in society that isn't visible today—cannot be discerned on the horizon. The official restoration of some features the Soviet legacy—the reinforced role of institutions as the political police, intimidation of the opposition and symbols as the Stalin figure, red star and flags—as a means of confronting the problems surrounding social control and political hierarchization in a post-communist society heralds new conflicts and de-democratizing tendencies. Of course, such developments could be affected by variables we are unaware of today, such as the existence of disaffected segments of the population that remain hidden, the willingness of the regime to repress eventual mass protests and the State's inability to formulate effective anti-crisis policies and corrective, modernizing reforms. At any rate, the reemergence of Russian autocracy reveals that the stagnation and (still modest) global decline of democracy that some authors have warned of¹⁴ has no few challenges in store for democracy in this new century.

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¹³ Putin has gone great lengths to avoid the so-called Color Revolutions—especially the cases of Orange and Pink Revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia—developed during the first decade of the XXI Century. These revolutions have proven successful in places where a semi-autocratic regime (which allows for the existence of independent media), a disunited elite, an unpopular administration and an opposition that is sufficiently broad and organized to mobilize the masses co-exist (Greene, 2014:14). None of these elements can be caught sight of in today's Russia, where a nationalist discourse has secured government support from most of the population, in what Kolesnikov (2015) has described as a new social contract established under the slogan of "Crimea in exchange for our liberties".

¹⁴ Over the past decade (2000-2010), at least 25 de-democratizing incidents, ranging from coups to the gradual curbing of democratic rights, have been reported in nations across several continents (Diamond, 2015:142-144).

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