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# The Kremlin Emboldened

## WHAT IS PUTINISM?

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A quarter-century after the demise of the Soviet regime, Russia again presents a powerful challenge to global liberalism and to the Western democratic community. Ambitious military modernization, aggression in the post-Soviet neighborhood, intervention in the Middle East, the construction of a global propaganda network, support for despots abroad, and brazen interference in elections in established democracies all point toward confrontation.

But these wide-ranging Russian policies also reflect a deeper evolution: As was the case in the Soviet Union before the reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev (1985–91), Russia is again ruled by a self-confident elite that claims to represent a superior alternative to liberal democracy. And the confidence of Russia's leaders has only increased as they witness the rise of politicians abroad—even in the United States—whose mentalities are consonant with their own.

How can we define the regime that Vladimir Putin and his associates embrace at home and trumpet abroad? Putinism is a form of autocracy that is *conservative*, *populist*, and *personalistic*. As such, it differs in key ways from developmentalist or otherwise transformative dictatorships, including the former Soviet party-state. It is *conservative* not only in its promotion, at home and abroad, of a traditionalist social agenda, but also per the term's literal meaning: Putinism broadly prioritizes the maintenance of the status quo while evincing hostility toward potential sources of instability. And these tendencies are closely intertwined with Russia's extractive, rent-driven economy. Putinism's *populism* overlaps with its conservatism in the form of crowd-pleasing efforts to resist what Russian leaders cast as the advance of decadent liberalism on such

issues as gay rights and women's equality. Yet Putinism's conservatism also constrains its use of other tools in the populist arsenal, such as reckless social spending. It also helps to explain an unusual feature of Putinist, as opposed to Western, populism: its stress on multiethnic and multiconfessional coexistence. Finally, as a *personalist autocracy*, Putinism rests on unrestricted one-man rule and the hollowing out of parties, institutions, and even individuals other than the president as independent political actors. But this close identification with one man may fatally undermine Putinism's effectiveness in its self-appointed role as a bulwark against upheaval.

### Conservatism

Putin's regime is, first of all, conservative in the exact sense: It prioritizes defense of the status quo and opposes all programs for transformation. Rulers generally appreciate stability, but Putin holds it sacred. Unlike Islamists, who seek to reestablish the pristine Muslim community of the time of Muhammad (570–632 C.E.), or interwar fascists, who extolled a mythical lost age of martial righteousness and racial purity, Putin and his retinue eschew reactionary visions that require substantially altering existing conditions or using methods, such as mass mobilization and violence, that imperil tranquility.

Progressive programs are also anathema to this outlook. Where Marxism condemns a miserable present in the name of a radiant postrevolutionary future, Putinism casts the present as better than good enough and regime change as the route to perdition. Putinism rejects programs for economic development as well, since they go against its overarching commitments to minimizing challenges to the status quo and maximizing elite rent extraction. Developmentalist leaders such as South Korea's Park Chung Hee (1963–79), Singapore's Lee Kwan Yew (1959–90), and China's Deng Xiaoping (1977–97) valued political stability, but their overriding aims were anything but conservative: These leaders prioritized breakneck economic growth and the improvement of popular living standards, not status quo politics and elite self-enrichment.

Developmentalism of any stripe conflicts with Putinism's aims in several ways. First, it requires high rates of investment, which in turn compel elites to limit themselves to skimming the frosting rather than consuming the whole confection. Second, particularly in technology-driven modern economies, developmentalism threatens to spawn a plethora of strong economic actors who might compromise the ruler's monopoly on power. Third, it can lead to destabilizing social change, including mobilization by rising social groups who seek a more accountable government. Fourth, it requires hiring and promoting officials on the basis of merit and not mere loyalty.

In all of these regards, the logic of developmentalism is at odds with

Putinism's conservative aims. Russia's predatory petroeconomy offers the Russian elite a more appealing alternative. Hydrocarbon-based economies are famous for generating lootable wealth, and sustaining the flow of oil and lucre requires only targeted investment in a single sector rather than high rates of investment throughout the economy. Elites can embezzle prodigiously without undermining the model. The petroeconomy also serves the regime's interests by helping to prevent the emergence of powerful autonomous actors. Instead of launching a diversified manufacturing and services economy, Putinism's petroeconomy concentrates wealth in a handful of immense corporations that the ruler and his closest associates can supervise themselves. Furthermore, while Putinism's economic model furnishes the ruler with the means to fund popular social support programs, it does not empower society. Rather than spurring the growth of assertive, autonomous middle and working classes, it sustains a working class and state-service bourgeoisie that depend on the ruler for jobs, income, and status.

Finally, unlike developmentalist models, the petroeconomy does not require meritocratic hiring and promotion policies that prioritize economic performance. Since Deng, Chinese officials' career advancement has hinged on their ability to encourage growth in the sector or territorial unit under their supervision. Under Putinism, officials instead are hired, promoted, and fired on the basis of their loyalty to the ruler and capacity for maintaining stability.<sup>1</sup> Governors are never dismissed for failing to spur prosperity in their provinces, but displays of independence or failure to deliver lopsided electoral victories for the president and his United Russia party earn a pink slip from Moscow. The Kremlin can afford to prioritize these concerns because forward-looking, dynamic administrators are not a necessity for the petroeconomy.

Putinism is also conservative in the ideological sense. While it eschews the idea of restoring a glorious past, it champions "traditional values."<sup>2</sup> Putin is not religious and has no interest in stoking popular piety, but he ostentatiously blesses Russia's traditional religions (especially the majority faith of Orthodox Christianity, but also Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism), and in turn charges religious leaders with consecrating him. Since the government *de facto* appoints the heads of religious organizations and controls their funding and property, Orthodox patriarchs, chief rabbis, and favored imams are only too happy to supply public paeans to the ruler's righteousness and indispensability to the nation.<sup>3</sup>

To build his conservative credibility, Putin sprinkles his speeches with condemnation of the "genderless and infertile" morality of the liberal West, with its commitments to gender equality and LGBT rights. To give his heterophilic rhetoric oomph, he backed a law adopted in 2013 against "homosexual propaganda" and shows little consternation in the face of rising anti-gay violence in Russia. To stand fast against feminism, he endorsed the decriminalization in 2017 of some forms of

domestic violence. According to police statistics, forty women per day are murdered in their homes by abusive partners in Russia, and this measure creates an even more permissive environment for abusers: Men are now allowed one free blow before their attacks are considered a criminal violation.<sup>4</sup>

The law does not specify how many one-time blows are allowed. One per relationship? One per argument? Such questions are hard to encode in law, but the legislation's parliamentary sponsor, Elena Mizulina, does not fret over these ambiguities. Celebrating the supposed defense of Russia's traditional values, she has argued that "we [seemingly, women] don't take such offense, even when, you see, a man beats his wife—all the same that's not as offensive as if a man is insulted, humiliated."<sup>5</sup>

Such measures serve Putin's ambition to direct the world's illiberal forces against those who would foist their "universal" liberal principles—and their democracy—on others. Soviet leaders did much the same thing, except that they posed as the vanguard of the vanguard, the leaders of the world's economically and politically progressive laboring classes in their struggle against international liberal capitalism and its political-military henchmen, Western governments. Putin and his staff instead aim to be the vanguard of the rearguard, the leaders of the world's socially and culturally conservative laboring classes against international liberal democracy and its political-military henchmen, Western governments. Soviet rulers bolstered their status with the claim to be the leaders of "progressive humanity."<sup>6</sup> Putin cannot plausibly make such a claim, but regressive humanity seems available, and at least Russia gets to lead something.

Armed with traditionalist rhetoric and a body of laws at home to back him up, Putin aims to convey a clear message to the masses in developing societies: My people and I bear no strange moral agenda. We too are offended by Western governments and NGOs who tell us to embrace homosexuality and reject traditional gender roles and identities. Our churches and mosques and temples, like yours, reject imposed liberal immorality. Join us and together we will stand strong for our cultural sovereignty and right to live as we will. The message also resonates among conservatives in the West who feel abandoned by their leaders on matters of sex and gender identity. Prominent American social conservative Pat Buchanan lauds Putin as a leader in the global charge against debauchery, the voice of "conservatives, traditionalists and nationalists of all continents and countries [who seek to] stand up against the cultural and ideological imperialism of what [Putin] sees as a decadent West."<sup>7</sup>

On the political as on the social scene, the Russian government positions itself as a shield against perilous transformations. To fellow authoritarian rulers, Putin strives to say: I bear no objectionable political agenda. I too am outraged by Western governments and NGOs who tell me that I must embrace democracy and reject traditional strongman

politics. My halls of power, like yours, remain firm in their rejection of imposed liberal democracy. Unlike Western leaders, I support your continuation in power—however you got there and whatever you do to stay there. Join me and together we will guard our sovereignty and right to rule as we will. Any regime in place deserves to be there; it is legitimate. Yours is, too.

Putinism's legitimacy allows for some exceptions. Putin's government supports illiberal candidates for high office in the West, even against sitting officeholders. Its hack-and-leak exploits favoring Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen during the recent U.S. and French presidential election cycles testify to this, as do its disinformation operations involving false stories spread by websites and news agencies of the far-right and the far-left.<sup>8</sup>

Still, even in the established democracies, Russia does not push for regime change or popular uprisings. This is not because Putin is constrained by an honorable commitment to fighting fair; he is always the first to bite and scratch when the referee turns his head. Nonetheless, his opposition to rebellion extends even to lands whose governments he loathes and thinks are out to get him. In the West, he feels it is wiser to work patiently and peacefully by sabotaging electoral institutions and undermining faith in public information and democratic procedures. Even behind enemy lines, spontaneous political change, particularly if driven from below, is inconsistent with Putinism's essential conservatism. Besides, it could give Russians ideas.

## Populism

Putin's stern rejection of revolution, homosexuality, and feminism is not just a tool for advancing Russia's claim to leadership of the global illiberal movement. Those stances—as well as his broader effort to reestablish the global stature Russia lost with the 1991 Soviet collapse—are primarily aimed at domestic audiences and are components of Putinism's populism. After the tumult Russia experienced under its last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and first postindependence president Boris Yeltsin (1991–99), Putin's commitment to avoiding regime change resonates with many Russians.

Putinism's stewards are avid consumers of survey data, and they know that Russians lean toward social conservatism. In a 2013 Pew survey, 74 percent of them—compared with 57 percent of Chinese, 36 percent of Japanese, 36 percent of Brazilians, 33 percent of Americans, and 11 percent of Spaniards—answered in the negative when asked “should society accept homosexuality?”<sup>9</sup> Russians also tend to reject feminist ideas about gender rights and roles. When presented in the most recent wave of the World Values Survey with the statement, “On the whole, men make better political leaders than women,” 57 percent of Russians

answered in the affirmative. By comparison, only 48 percent of Chinese, 28 percent of Japanese, 28 percent of Brazilians, 19 percent of Americans, and 15 percent of Spaniards agreed.<sup>10</sup>

If pushing back against the feminist and gay-rights agendas are easy crowd pleasers, pursuing national glory is an even surer bet. Putin's moves to challenge Western preeminence, renovate the armed forces, reestablish supremacy in the post-Soviet neighborhood, and intervene in the ongoing Syrian civil war have met with popular acclaim, as one would expect in a country with a long tradition of empire and a recent history of humiliation. Annexing Crimea has yielded a particularly mighty boost. In Gallup's annual surveys, Putin's approval ratings fell from 83 to 54 percent between 2008 and 2013. In 2014, following the seizure of Crimea, his rating shot back to 83 percent and has remained about there ever since.<sup>11</sup>

The annexation of Crimea and the international sanctions it provoked have aided the government's effort to cast Russia as a besieged fortress. Soviet leaders conveyed the same message: Our only real friends are ourselves. America and its allies are intent on keeping us down. Only if we stand together behind our ruler (in the Soviet era, the Party), who defends the nation against myriad menacing foes, can we achieve security and make our nation great in the world.<sup>12</sup>

## The National Question

On some questions, Putinism's strict conservative bent gives its version of populism a distinct cast. Many right-populist nationalists, such as France's Marine Le Pen, Hungary's Viktor Orbán, and Donald Trump in the United States, combine suspicion of the outside world with ethnonationalism at home. Putin does not. He openly reviles the ethnonationalist call for *Rossia dlia russkikh* (Russia for the ethnic Russians). While Orbán and other populists in Eastern Europe joust to outdo one another in associating the civil liberties and intellectual freedoms they disdain with Jewish financiers and conspiracies, Putin has steered clear of syncing his attacks on rights with anti-Semitism. He has constructed a magnificent Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow and exhorted Jewish emigrés to return.<sup>13</sup> He also treats Russia's Muslims as full partners in the national community. He rarely uses the phrase "Islamist terrorism" (*islamistskii terrorizm*), preferring to speak of *terrorizm* sans adjective. He refers to ISIS as the "so-called Islamic State," and Russian law requires the media to note each time ISIS is mentioned that it is a banned terrorist group, as distinguished from a legitimate Islamic entity.<sup>14</sup> Putin's top associates represent a *mélange* of ethnicities. His staff is headed by Anton Vaino, an ethnic Estonian; Sergei Kirienko, who is Jewish; and Magomed salam Magomedov, a Dagestani Muslim. His defense minister and personal confidant Sergei Shoigu, who has

become a symbol of Russia's military modernization and renewed assertiveness, is an ethnic Tuvan (hailing from a Siberian region bordering Mongolia).

Ethnonational inclusivity reflects Putinism's inheritance from the Soviet Union, which prided itself on cultivating the "friendship of the peoples." Under Putinism, as under the Soviet system, the lived experience of some minority communities may differ starkly from the government's official pronouncements, but official ideology nonetheless rejects ethnonational chauvinism.

Yet Putinism goes a step beyond its predecessor by adding a confessional component. Sovietism celebrated intercommunal harmony but defined communities as ethnic groups (called "nations," or *natsii* in Russian) and largely ignored religious groups. In Soviet thinking, religion would disappear anyway as the people advanced to belief in scientific atheism. Putinism embraces Russia's main religions—even as it bans or restricts those seen as lacking roots in the country—and touts interconfessional as well as interethnic understanding. Putin strives to present Russian society to the world as a model of intercommunal rapport, his regime as a prototype of the institutions that can produce such harmony, and himself as a friend of all nations.

Putin's aversion to ethnonationalist rabble-rousing is of a piece with his general suspicion of social activism. In this respect, he differs perceptibly from right-populists such as Le Pen, Orbán, and Trump who seek to stir or provoke their supporters to political involvement. The Presidential Administration deploys provincial officialdom from Pskov to Kamchatka to get out the vote (or at least to deposit the premarked ballots) for Putin and United Russia in the country's pseudo-elections, but aside from such stage-managed, intermittent involvement, Putinism's custodians prefer that people get along, stay home, and keep their minds off politics.

Avoiding ethnonationalism also serves Putinism's thoroughgoing conservatism. By neither antagonizing minorities nor stoking majoritarian prejudice, Putinism avoids inciting destabilizing intercommunal tension. Unlike gay people or women, some ethnic and religious communities are geographically concentrated and might engage in separatist mobilization and violent resistance. Putin's discerning brand of bias targets groups that cannot fight back while reassuring those that can. It is also calibrated to appeal to popular opinion: While Russians vary dramatically from Westerners and people in many developing countries in their views regarding homosexuality and gender equality, they treasure intercommunal harmony and tend to rank within or close to the European pack on racial and ethnic tolerance.<sup>15</sup>

Populist and conservative elements also intermingle in Putinist economics. In addition to appropriating rents for the enrichment of the loyal few, Putin has embraced the prudent petro-ruler's tactic of distributing a portion to potentially restive sectors of society, and particularly Russia's



many pensioners. Still, Putin's regime abjures the market-defying, budget-busting bacchanalia characteristic of Argentina's Perónism or Venezuela under the late Hugo Chávez and his successor Nicolás Maduro. Since it aims to preserve stability above all else, Putinism favors sustainability in social spending over maximizing short-term disbursements to supporters.

Budgetary constraints also restrain Putin's global play to restore great-power status. Disrupting elections in democracies, projecting propaganda on RT and Sputnik, annexing Crimea, instigating a spurious civil war in eastern Ukraine, and propping up Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria cost real money, but they do not require the vast outlays that the Soviet regime devoted to its global commitments. Military spending, moreover, is subject to ordinary budgetary constraints: With the economy sluggish and revenues stagnant, the government is set to slash outlays on defense substantially during 2017–19.<sup>16</sup>

If generating popularity for the ruler is an overriding goal for populist regimes, Putinism must be counted as extraordinarily effective. Even through economic downturn, Putin's traditional-values—vaunting, nationalistic but ethnically inclusive, demobilizational, paternal petro-populism has helped him sustain levels of public support enjoyed by no other long-serving world leader.

### **Personalist Autocracy**

Finally, Putinism is a personalistic form of autocracy—rule by a single person who answers only to himself. All major government decisions are in line with his preferences, and no holders of political or economic power can openly defy him without jeopardizing their offices, fortunes, and right to reside in Russia.

Putin did not inherit his status as an autocrat; he created it. Russia's 1993 constitution calls for federalism, and under former president Boris Yeltsin provincial officialdom gained much authority over budgeting, law enforcement, and other functions. At the central level, the constitution, despite strongly favoring the presidency, also provided for some division of power between the executive and legislative branches. It allowed Russia's parliament, the bicameral Federal Assembly, to acquire enough clout to become a hotbed of public resistance to Yeltsin. Even within the executive, Yeltsin's authority was limited by his infirmity and his vulnerability to manipulation by courtiers. And Yeltsin-era Russia teemed with nationally celebrated, self-made politicians besides the president. They included Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov; Sverdlovsk governor Eduard Rossel; Nizhny Novgorod governor and deputy prime minister Boris Nemtsov; and Krasnoyarsk governor, general, and 1996 presidential contender Aleksandr Lebed. Other players, such as privatization director Anatoly Chubais and billionaire-gone-wild Boris Berzovsky, were widely regarded as the president's puppet masters.

All of that changed under Putin, who centralized, concentrated, and personalized power while establishing himself as Russia's sovereign authority and sole political luminary. To centralize power vis-à-vis Russia's regions, Putin replaced provincial security-services personnel with his own appointees, altered the distribution of the tax take to favor Moscow, sent "federal inspectors" to provincial capitals to keep an eye on governors, created powerful new federal agencies at the provincial level, and established "superregions" whose heads monitored the governors and reported to the Presidential Administration. Finally, Putin scrapped popular elections for governors and assumed the power to appoint them. By midway into his second presidential term (2004–2008), he had restored near-Soviet levels of centralization, but with a unified, hierarchical command structure headed by the Presidential Administration rather than the Communist Party.

Putin also reestablished a Soviet-level concentration of power in the executive branch, converting the Federal Assembly into a rubber stamp. He rewrote the respective rules for election to the legislature's two houses, the State Duma and the Federation Council, and tasked close associates with building the United Russia party to dominate those elections. United Russia now runs parliament, supported by three "opposition" parties—the Communists, the ultranationalist and impressively misnamed Liberal Democratic Party, and the nominally social-democratic A Just Russia—that provide a veneer of multipartism, but readily supply unanimous or near-unanimous votes on behalf of presidential initiatives. Draft laws originate in the Presidential Administration or other government agencies under the ruler's immediate control.

Power under Putinism is not just centralized in Moscow and concentrated in the executive, as in Soviet times. To a far greater extent than during the Soviet era, it is also intensely personalized. Except during Stalin's time, no one individual ruled the USSR; rather, the Party ruled. Even Stalin ceaselessly affirmed his allegiance and subordination to the Party. But there is no Party in Putinism, only a party, and Putin treats United Russia—which was founded and exists solely to support him—more as a necessary nuisance than as an asset.

Putin is not merely Russia's best-known, most powerful politician; he is its only politician. Anyone who seeks public acclaim apart from the ruler does so in defiance of him. Among such figures, only Alexei Navalny, the jaunty corruption fighter who splits his time between jail and organizing protests, has even partially succeeded in winning recognition as a politician. Among officeholders, only Putin is endowed with the authority to cultivate a national following, and only he has one. The rest are administrators who derive their authority from the ruler's favor and their service to him. The four-fifths of Russians who approve of Putin have no common second- or third-favorite national politician, though some like their own Putin-appointed governors and Putin-approved mayors.

Putin's authority stands independent not only of any organization or ideology, but also of the office he holds. He has been the center of power both as president (2000–2008 and 2012–present) and as prime minister (2008–12). If Putin chose to become minister of transport, the minister of transport would rule Russia. Elections do not determine who rules; they merely display the ruler's mastery. While Putin would probably win free and fair elections with ease, no one knows for sure how he or United Russia would fare. To most Russians it does not matter anyway, since they do not see themselves as the source of Putin's power. Putin's authority derives from his being Putin, not from his winning votes.

As sovereign, Putin also stands above impersonal rules. He makes, alters, and ignores the law at will, and he retains the ultimate power to decide when other officials—and major economic actors—may flout its provisions with impunity. Each of Russia's scores of billionaires thrives only at Putin's pleasure or at least with his forbearance. Those who openly defy him land in prison or exile, often with vastly diminished assets.

To be sure, Putin calls himself a mere servant of the people and subject of the law. He never even hints that *le loi, c'est moi* ("I am the law"), as traditional hereditary rulers sometimes do. Nor does he trade on his formidable charisma to invoke the *Führerprinzip*, the Nazi theory that sacralized the ruler's will as the highest source of decision.

Putinism also eschews the trappings of a personality cult. Photos of the ruler displaying his semi-magnificent torso while riding on horseback may receive attention (and elicit chuckles) abroad, but they are about as far as the pageantry goes. Although the media never fail to make Putin and his policies shine, nothing akin to the cults of Stalin, Hitler, Mao, or post-Soviet leaders such as Turkmenistan's Saparmurad Niyazov and Azerbaijan's Heydar Aliyev are to be found in Putin-era Russia. Putin prefers to legitimate his authority in rational-legal rather than charismatic terms. This approach preserves Putinism's smart modern façade, and the choice of decorum over fervor fits well with the regime's fundamental conservatism.

### Will Putinism Persist?

While Putin's conservative populist autocracy must be counted among the twenty-first century's most successful and imposing authoritarian regimes, several key weaknesses threaten its viability. Its predatory petroeconomy cannot generate the kind of sustained gains in official probity, economic growth, or social equity that might bolster the regime's legitimacy; its ideology cannot deliver a compelling vision of the future; and its extraordinary personalization leaves its functioning wholly dependent on one fallible individual.

Russia's current economic model has serious limits as a wellspring of legitimacy. The country's vast hydrocarbon reserves will always enable

the ruler to reward his favorites and fund social programs that sustain popular tranquility, but the overriding goals of preventing change and enabling elite predation rule out reforms that could spur robust development. The state's vital role notwithstanding, the economic programs of countries that have successfully developed in recent decades all involved a major role for private ownership and investment. In China, the private sector now produces at least two-thirds of GDP.<sup>17</sup> The imperatives of Putinist political economy push the opposite way: Between 2005 and 2015, the state's share of GDP in Russia rose from 35 to 70 percent. After a mild burst of market-friendly measures during his first term (2000–2004), Putin reasserted state control. Between 2013 and 2016 alone, the number of state and “unitary” enterprises in Russia doubled. “Unitary enterprises” are commercially operated but owned by the federal, provincial, or municipal government. Their ostensible purpose is to fill gaps or supplement market forces, but in practice they often function as an additional tool allowing officials at all levels to purloin land and businesses, suppress competition, and dominate markets.

While Putin deservedly receives credit for restoring orderly public administration after a decade of bureaucratic chaos, his officials are more a self-service than a civil-service elite: Their talent for leveraging public position for private gain has grown much faster than their capacity for delivering public goods.<sup>18</sup>

That outcome suits Putinism's purposes, but it has produced a bureaucratic racket economy rather than a vigorous market. In Transparency International's 2016 ratings on control of corruption, Russia ranked 131<sup>st</sup> out of 176 countries—lower than Malawi, Côte d'Ivoire, and Bolivia. By comparison, China and India are tied for 79<sup>th</sup> place, and South Korea occupies 52<sup>nd</sup> place.<sup>19</sup> Astronomical venality on the part of a country's officialdom can hold down investment: In Russia, investment in fixed capital makes up just 22 percent of GDP, while the analogous figures are 44 percent in China, 28 percent in India, and 29 percent in South Korea.<sup>20</sup> Low investment may portend economic torpor, at least in the absence of a steep rise in oil prices.

The Putinist model is also incapable of delivering economic fairness. Russia now tops the global charts on wealth inequality, with the top ten percent claiming 87 percent of all household wealth, compared with 83 percent in Brazil, 76 percent in the United States, 66 percent in China, and 63 percent in Japan.<sup>21</sup>

The combination of mind-bending official malfeasance, lackluster economic prospects, and sharply rising inequality might already be testing Russians' fabled tolerance for extortionate government. The recent rise in Alexei Navalny's fame and popularity, particularly among Russian youth, is noteworthy. Russian state media alternate between embargoing and smearing Navalny, but in early 2017 his YouTube posts revealing and ridiculing official rot began to attract millions of Russian viewers, and his Twitter following swelled to two million. His calls for

protest have also drawn hundreds of thousands of people into the streets all over Russia, despite threats of physical abuse and jail time.<sup>22</sup> His anticorruption campaign, clearly striking a chord, has spurred the boldest, broadest social movement of the Putin era and prompted a rise in the government's use of repression against oppositionists.

Even as Putinism's economic model proves itself unable to provide probity, prosperity, or justice, its capacity for ideological inspiration may be faltering. Putinism's "just no change" philosophy comforted many Russians in the wake of the raucous and ruinous 1990s, but how compelling a vision of the future does it offer as Putin enters his third decade in power? And while persecuting gay people and affirming men's rights to discipline disobedient wives might warm the hearts of Orthodox traditionalists, how well will it wear with Russia's young and middle-aged urbanites?

Putinism's illiberal crusade might have its limits with international audiences as well. At a time when global surveys show a long-term trend in favor of greater public acceptance of sexual diversity and gender equality, Putin's macho, homophobic chest-thumping and blasé response to revelations of torture camps for gay men in Chechnya risk rendering Putinism contemptible rather than impressive or imposing among publics in the advanced industrialized world and in some developing countries. What is more, siding with Trump and other right-populists who play on ethnonationalist themes in domestic politics threatens to undo Putin's efforts to cast himself and Russia as foes of ethnic and religious chauvinism.

Putin's zeal for aiding illiberal demagogues and for hacking democrats may also have begun to backfire. While the perception that Putin's efforts might have tipped the 2016 U.S. presidential election represented a spectacular blow in favor of Moscow's claim to global leadership of illiberal forces, Putin now faces the risk that Trump's domestic scandals and low international approval ratings may damage the Kremlin's brand. Public revulsion at Putin's disinformation campaigns and cyberassaults may be dimming the fortunes of Europe's illiberals. Surprise at Putin's brazen intervention in the U.S. election hampered Washington's response, but Moscow's efforts were easily detected and other democracies quickly took notice. Despite efforts by Putin's hackers and disinformation disseminators to undermine the liberal centrist Emmanuel Macron when he ran against Marine Le Pen in the May 2017 French presidential election, Macron went on to thrash Putin's preferred choice by a two-to-one margin. In his first joint press conference with Putin in late May 2017, the 39-year-old French president pledged to be "constantly vigilant" in monitoring the plight of gay men in Russia and implicitly chastised Putin for converting Russia's international media outlets into "organs of influence and propaganda that spread counterfeit truths about me."<sup>23</sup> The following month, Macron's party *La République en Marche* and its like-minded liberal-centrist partner, the Democratic Movement, won a crushing three-fifths majority in parliamentary elec-

tions, while Le Pen's National Front—the recipient of millions of euros in Russian-government-connected donations—won less than two percent of the seats. Women candidates captured two-fifths of the seats, the largest proportion ever in the National Assembly.

Putin might be inadvertently uniting liberal democracy's supporters elsewhere as well. As Putin's cybersaboteurs set their sights on Germany's electoral machinery, incumbent chancellor and Christian Democratic Party leader Angela Merkel warned Putin that Germany would take "decisive action" if Russia tried to disrupt her country's September 2017 parliamentary elections.<sup>24</sup> President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, a leader of the rival Social Democrats, backed the chancellor and denounced Russia for "seeking its identity rather in opposition to Europe and the West than in common purpose."<sup>25</sup>

With each month bringing fresh revelations about the intrusions of Russian hackers, who have reached even into voter databases, Putin is fast acquiring a global reputation as an implacable enemy of democracy as well as of liberal rights and progressive values. As Swedish schools launch programs to teach children to spot Russian disinformation designed to demoralize them and undermine their trust, Putin is beginning to look more like a conniving vandal leading a perpetually frustrated upstart than a shrewd statesman steering a confident great power.

## What Comes After Putin?

Is Putin's aging visage starting to lose its luster before domestic audiences as well? While recent anticorruption protests demonstrate that this might be the case for some Russians, by and large Putin's reputation at home remains stellar.<sup>26</sup> Since the day he took office as acting president at the century's turn, most Russians have trusted and supported him, and his authority shows little sign of fraying. As long as Putin is the face of Putinism, Russia's conservative populist autocracy is probably safe. The ordeals of the 1990s, when Russians experienced an explosion of crime and chaos together with a precipitous drop in global status, swayed them in favor of a ruler who lords it over the law and his compatriots while fixating on greatness and glory abroad. But how will Putinism fare after its creator—the raider who subdues the raiders, the imperialist who fends off the imperialists—falters or departs?

In fact, Putinism's greatest liability may be its thoroughgoing personalism and lack of foundations that transcend the individual leader. Putinism's goals and principles elicit broad elite consent, but their force stems largely from the fact that Putin pursues and articulates them. There is no Politburo, just Putin's inner circle. There are no powerful politicians, just Putin's administrators. There is no Party, just a party that lacks a shred of authority apart from its association with Putin. Nor has Putin spoken a word about a successor. While the constitution calls

for the prime minister to become acting president in the event of the president's departure and for fresh elections to be held within ninety days, few Russians expect that they themselves will make the decision at the polling place. Would Putin's passing prompt a power struggle—perhaps even violence? Who would the parties to that struggle even be? For all Putin's painstaking preoccupation with stability and continuity, Russians have no idea who will rule them tomorrow if their leader dies tonight. Putin himself might not know, either.

## NOTES

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