Russia under Putin: Titanic looking for its iceberg?

Lilia Shevtsova

Carnegie Moscow Center, 16/2 Tverskaya Moscow, 125009 Moscow, Russian Federation

Abstract

December 2011 protests in Russia, the largest after the collapse of the Soviet Union, shattered the status quo that had taken shape over the last decade and signaled that Russia is entering turbulent waters. Russia found itself caught in a trap: the 2011–2012 elections perpetuate a personalized power system that became the source of decay. The top-down rule and its “personifcator” – Vladimir Putin – are already rejected by the most dynamic and educated urban population. However, no clear political alternative with a broad social support has yet emerged to replace the old Russian matrix.

In terms of strategic significance, Putin’s regime will most certainly unravel in the foreseeable perspective. But it is hard to predict what consequences this will have: the system’s disintegration and even collapse of the state, growing rot and atrophy, or the last grasp in the life of personalized power and transformation that will set Russia on a new foundation. One thing is apparent: transformation will not happen in the form of reform from above and within, and if it does occur, it will be the result of the deepening crisis and society’s pressure.

Is it the beginning of the end or the beginning of the new beginning? And whatever it could be what will it bring to Russia – a continuing stagnation and atrophy, implosion or a long anticipated breakthrough which will allow this lonely power, the former bully and the current spoiler, to finally join Europe? The pundits could continue their deliberations playing with various scenarios which became recently a fashion in the Russian expert industry. And the more they are uncertain about the immediate or medium term future (or unable to admit the problems it will bring), the more energetically they get engaged in discussion of the future Russian prospects – “Russia-20”, “Russia-25”(1) which allows to find a soothing option of development which could justify the acceptance and connivance with the present.

Meanwhile, the nature of the usual (and so boring) debate on “Whether Russia?” is gradually changing: the optimists present less persuasive arguments which they themselves apparently do not believe and the pessimists have more convincing evidence.

I would argue that there is more certainty with respect to the future (both short term and middle term) Russian trajectory, though uncertainty remains with respect to the timing of inevitable developments and their final implications. The new political cycle set in motion with Russia’s December 2011 parliamentary election and the March 2012 presidential election and the ensuing public protests against the Kremlin’s election fraud (in reality demonstrating much deeper than we could anticipate frustration and anger with the Russian reality) heralds Russia’s entry into what will perhaps prove the final stage in the decay of the personalized power system built not by Putin or Yeltsin (no!), but by Stalin. Even we in Russia thought that we got rid of it in the 50-s or at least at the end of the 80-s with the collapse of the Soviet Union. We were wrong: Russia has been continuing to suffocate in Stalin’s deadly embraces despite of new elaborate make ups and political plastic surgery.

Indeed, the Russian System has already gone through several stages of rot and even collapse (in 1991), and attempts by the ruling elite to breathe new life into it and postpone the final agony. The Russian System, this unique civilization, succeeded to survive through the Khrushchev thaw, Brezhnev’s stabilization, Gorbachev’s perestroika, the Yeltsin revolution, the Putin status quo, and the Medvedev-era imitation of modernization. These were all efforts by the ruling elite to adapt personalized...
power system with its global pretensions to the changing reality, preserving all the while its genetic code – the state’s aspiration to complete control over society and property, and justify this control by turning the outside world into the hostile environment.

Vladimir Putin’s return to the Kremlin at a time when the most dynamic and progressive-minded part of the population in the big cities has started openly rejecting his regime marks the start of a new standoff between the regime and a society now awakened from lengthy slumber. This confrontation which could take various forms – both active and passive – will most likely speed up the Russian System’s demise. But it is not clear whether the result will be the political system’s collapse and new implosion of the state, an attempt to keep a hold on power by tightening the screws (which may produce only temporary result), or transformation and the emergence of a new system based on rule of the law and pluralism. It is not clear for now when and under what conditions such transformation could take place – before the system starts to collapse, during its collapse, or afterwards. Nor it is clear exactly what forms the decay process might take.

Let us look then at the Russian System’s resources and deliberate on how long they might be able to prolong its life; and also at the protests’ and opposition’s possibilities, as well as the conditions in which they could become a driving force for transformation.

1. The Russian System’s room for maneuver

The Russian System has been perpetuating itself down the centuries and finally reached its zenith under Stalin, when it managed to establish its own galaxy of countries around it and claimed to offer both geopolitical and normative alternative to liberal civilization. Its basic underlying principles are: personalized power, merger between power and assets, and 1. derzhavnichestvo, that is, pretentions (longing for) of global influence, preservation of ‘spheres of interests’ in the post-Soviet area. The Russian System presents patterns similar to those found in other authoritarian and totalitarian systems, but there are also two specific features distinguishing it from similar political constructs. The first of these is the militarization of public life and its subjugation to logic of war or the need to be constantly mobilized for war. Second is great power aspirations, supported by the nuclear status, that is, the ambition for constant expansion (whether real, or just the rhetorical imitation) as a means of perpetuating the personalized rule within the country.

After the Soviet collapse and the abandonment of communist legitimacy, the Russian System found new survival mechanisms, what is more, some of them rather unexpected. One of the means used to perpetuate personalized power under a new guise was the Soviet Union’s collapse, which made it easier to continue authoritarianism under Yeltsin, though without its communist foundation now. Furthermore, by introducing market mechanisms, the renewed Russian elite resolved the task of finally fulfilling its dream of transferring state assets to its own private ownership. Paradoxically, privatization of state assets only consolidated Russia’s already traditional fusion of power and assets, this time in a new and much more civilized – “market” form.

Changing the figure at the top – from Yeltsin to Putin, Putin to Medvedev, and now back to Putin again – became another of the means for keeping the system going as it created the illusion of change without actually changing the basic construction (regime change as a means to guarantee the system’s survival). The imitation of Western institutions has also proven an effective instrument of, firstly, the Russian elite’s personal integration into the West, thus giving it Western living standards, and secondly, creating the appearance of renewal and a break with the Soviet past. Finally, the modernization slogan advanced by the Putin–Medvedev tandem (with Medvedev acting as ‘fake president’ to ensure Putin’s return to the Kremlin) demonstrated the ruling elite’s desire to use Western resources and technology to revive Russia’s increasingly flabby economy.

The Russian System uses a whole host of other mechanisms to keep itself going and meet the interests of the ruling elite and the groups that serve it. Chief among them are: absence of any coherent ideology and principles, which are replaced by circumstance-based ‘pragmatism’ that often conceals the incompatible ideas and principles; comparisons with the ‘bad’ Yeltsin period in order to present Putin as the leader who guarantees stability; combination of carrot and stick tactics (co-opting members of various social groups, paternalistic policy aimed to buy people’s loyalty, and selective use of force or ‘scare tactics’ in order to avoid public consolidation against the authorities); rather broad space for personal freedoms, like the right to immigrate, that has to prevent people from demanding political freedoms.

Finally one should also mention a foreign policy based on the principle of ‘being simultaneously with, within and against the West’. This foreign policy makes it easier for Russia’s political elite to personally integrate into Western society while at the same time enabling them to keep society closed off from the West.1

But the thing that must be clear is that these are all attempts to prolong the life of a system that has already outlived its time. The system’s essence remains unchanged regardless of the constant modifications and attempts to adapt it to new conditions. It remains focused on oppressing society and the individual in order to serve the interests of the state bureaucracy and its affiliated business circles.

Putinism has become just another means of trying to give breath to the dying system’s life. Putin’s pact with Russian society was based on the premise that society would keep quiet and not meddle, and in return the authorities would

---

1 The Russian political class still follows the paradigm described by Sir Isaiah Berlin in 1940s, “Russia prefers other countries to abstain from taking an interest in her affaires; that is to say, to insulate herself from the rest of the world without remaining isolated from it” (Berlin, 2005, p. 90).
guarantee stability, raise living standards, and ensure people had a certain degree of personal freedom. Society was in need of an anesthetic after the dramatic ups and downs of the Yeltsin years and was therefore willing to consent to this pact. But the events of 2011–2012 have shown that this breather could not last forever. The protests against election fraud and the gradual radicalization of the protest movement, which has started calling for an end to Putin’s leadership, and the remaining bitterness and antagonism after the elections are over show that the most dynamic and educated sections of Russian society are now rejecting the Putin regime.

How far is Russia’s political class willing to go to defend the system, and are there people or groups within the ruling team willing to consider the possibility of its transformation from within? The way Putin and his team have reacted to the protest wave and the fact that the Kremlin turned to massive election rigging show that they are not willing even to consider either holding free elections, which would threaten their hold on power, or loosening the system. Just on the contrary, the Kremlin after guaranteeing Putin his victory in the presidential elections with the help of massive fraud has started to gradually move toward more restrictive policy before elections repressions could have create a bad image and prevent legitimation (both internal and external) of the new-old presidency, but after the elections the Kremlin has started to feel less constrained by the legitimacy demands. The Russian authorities definitely understand that any attempt to loosen the grip on power and open up some room for competition (by giving the political opposition free access to national television, for example) would undermine the ruling elite’s monopoly. In any case, the whole logic behind the personalized rule is such that Putin and his team cannot voluntarily relinquish control of the Kremlin because in this case they would lose control of their assets and would have to account for the events of the last 12 years, which include no shortage of dramatic moments, from the Chechen war to usurpation of power through “controlled” elections in 2004–2005, 2007–2008 and finally in 2011–2012. Putin’s team clearly has no desire to see developments take this turn and do not want to follow the fate of Mubarak and his friends in Egypt. They will therefore fight to preserve their hold on power by all means possible, though they would prefer not to address the raw violence unless this is the last resort.

The ruling team has a wide variety of means at its disposal – the carrot and stick trick still works, though ever less effectively. Today the authorities proved that they do not balk at using methods capable of provoking conflict and tension in society, which can then serve as the pretext for tightening the screws of government. During the election campaign the authorities have started to set one section of the population against the other (provincial Russia against the big city dwellers, for example, ‘Russia against Moscow’). They provoke the rise of nationalism, even though they know what destructive consequences this could have for the country and they apparently hope that they still could manipulate nationalist movement (what an illusion!). They corrupt Russia’s young people, especially in the provinces, trying to develop in their midst Russian ‘red guards’ detachments that they can then use against their political opponents in Moscow and large cities. This concerted effort to demoralize and splinter society could have dramatic consequences for Russia by provoking in the end destructive and aggressive movements. Ironically, Putin’s regime trying desperately to preserve the status quo has already started to undermine stability by provoking tensions.

Indeed, the authorities do not form a monolithic group. Various interests, views, and group conflicts have always existed within the ruling elite. So far, the authorities and allied groups have managed to preserve basic consolidation within their ranks, with Putin still satisfying most of the elite as a choice of leader (though not unconditionally). The entrenched interests necessitating the system’s preservation go too deep. Of course, some people within this group apparently realize that the system cannot last forever and is in the process of degradation. Some of them recently demonstrated some support for the protest movement. A few members of the ruling class even took part in protests against election fraud (most notable being the ‘within the system’ liberals – Alexei Kudrin and Anatoly Chubais). But this is no more as yet than dissatisfaction among certain factions within the system over particular rules of the game and a desire to encourage Putin toward acting from the top to change the balance of power, get rid of the most controversial figures, and begin economic reforms. This is most definitely dream of the “systemic liberals” who are leftovers of the Yeltsin’s regime and still hold their place within Putin’s orbit.

One could feel that part of the elite would like the regime to make internal changes in order to stem the growing protests, but this aim ultimately serves to modernize the system without changing its nature. The discontented among Putin’s own ranks are not yet calling for him to leave, and do not talk about changing the basic principles on which the system is built.

Some Russian and Western observers conclude with hope that Putin will have no choice but to start a process of reform and even liberalization. “Putin-2.0 will definitely start reforming!” the incurable optimists would argue just as they had been waiting for Medvedev to do the same earlier and just as they had hoped for Putin to become a reformer before Medvedev interlude. These hopes apparently are based on assumption that the personalized power model is still capable of change or that Russia can be modernized only from the top. These optimists are in for a dousing of cold water. The last twenty years in Russia have seen no shortage of attempts to carry out limited reform, but they have never succeeded in preventing political and economic stagnation. And how can one carry out economic liberalization while strengthening the corrupted state’s monopoly and control over the economy? How do you fight corruption if you turn the parliament into a circus and bury independent courts and media?

Regrettfully, the “authoritarian modernization” idea is still quite popular among not only Russian systemic liberals but even among the liberals critical of Putin who are fascinated by the Lee Kuan Yew “thesis”.2 They still have to deliberate on the empirical evidence that, according to Amartya Sen, an Indian economist, “have not provided any confirmation of this thesis,
and there is little evidence that authoritarian politics actually helps economic growth” (2000, p. 15).\(^3\) The fact that some liberal circles in Russia (true, less numerous than before) still dream about “authoritarian modernization” reflect not only their lack of trust in the Russian society but also much more their fear of accountability for the previous period of the Russian developments that they’ve been also responsible for.

One also can be but amazed at the naivety or idealism of those who continue to believe in ‘gradual’ reform (step by step). Supporters of the ‘gradual’ path, for instance, assert that reform should begin, say, first in selected areas, for instance, in education, healthcare, and agriculture, and only then spread further. But how do you reform these sectors without demonopolizing them and opening them to competition, and without the rule of law and independent courts? Anyway, the authorities’ continued monopoly on power and its rejection of competition makes any real reform impossible, even in just these limited sectors.

Potential attempts to ‘gradually’ introduce competition and the rule of law raise further questions. Who gets to decide which forces will be allowed to make use of competition and fair laws, and how do you introduce these things ‘one step at a time’, first in specially designated zones (gated communities?) separate from the rest of the country and only then in other areas of life? In fact, gradualism was the idea behind Medvedev’s Skolkovo as the area of innovation. Who remembers now Skolkovo that had to be an example of the gradual and selective approach and soon turned into ghost project and who takes Medvedev seriously? I wonder if anyone in Russia or outside even among those who call for this kind of ‘gradual’ approach really believe that it can actually work. But irrespective of what is behind “gradualism” (faith or cynicism) this concept for some optimists (or loyalists) is a good reason to justify continuation of Putin’s rule.

Any attempts to reform Russia while preserving the personalized power system and the hyper-presidency that serves as its constitutional foundation are doomed to fail, as this system by its very nature makes pluralism and the rule of law impossible. Today, with their support base crumbling away, the authorities are frantically trying to keep hold of power at any price and are in even less of a position to start reforms, all too aware that this would undermine their control of society.

Continued hopes for change from above is a sign of an archaic thinking still in place (sometimes encountered among Western observers too) that puts the emphasis not on laws and rules, but on a specific leader as the driving force for change. It cannot be ruled out that the political class might try to preserve its hold on power by removing Putin through coup d’état or by getting Putin’s consent, while keeping the constitutional and political system based around the vertical power hierarchy in place. But this would only prolong the system’s death throes.

The main thing to note is that Putin cannot take the ‘middle road’ some observers dream about. He cannot maintain stability now that his regime is increasingly losing its legitimacy among the big city populations, but nor can he set reforms in motion, for this would inevitably disrupt his power vertical.

The authorities’ tactical manoeuvres can no longer stave off the crisis that has already begun. One can make a conclusion: the system adaptability (amazing until recently) has started to wear-out. The system cannot guarantee Russians neither personal security, nor further economic wellbeing, nor sense of dignity for its citizens. This system works only to satisfy the entrenched interest groups at the expense of the society. But today one may conclude that this system can’t guarantee these groups that their interests will be taken care of. The paradox is that the status quo in Russia is speeding up the degeneration of the system, but the attempts to update this status quo without liquidating its basis (personalized power) threaten to break down the system, like it happened in 1991.

The question remains: can Russia as a human, national and social entity survive through its system degeneration or its breakdown? And what will be the price to pay for ordinary citizens? Finally: how will these two options end – with fragmentation of the state and the country or their rebirth? We may have answers to these questions sooner than we think now.

2. What could be force for change?

The December 2011 protest movement (it is also was called “the Snow Revolution” as the protesters wore white ribbons or the movement of the “angry citizen”) has emerged on the wave of anger against election fraud during the December 2011 parliamentary elections. Another trigger for the protest became the fraudulent presidential elections in March 2012.\(^4\) True, rigged elections and even preceding it swap between Medvedev and Putin that had been perceived by the population as a slap in the face became a catalyst of the anger tide – the causes that brought it had been much deeper and had been developing for some time underneath. I have in mind growing starting with 2005 – 2006 frustration of the urban educated segments of the Russian society with the corrupted state and lack of strategic vision for Russia, absence of the “lifts” for the younger generation and possibilities for promotion, criminalization of authorities and growing degradation of the “presidential vertical” (the top-down presidential rule).

The sudden protest explosion in Russia could become the final stage in the process of degeneration of the Russian System. The “angry citizen” rebellion was born out of the urban population’s desire to put moral principles, such as dignity, honesty

---

\(^3\) Moreover, as the last elections in Singapore demonstrated there is a tendency for political liberalization that has to allow further economic development (Ortmann, 2011).

\(^4\) While the official results of the vote at the parliamentary elections gave the United Russia, pro-Kremlin’s party, 49.3 per cent, in reality, according to the independent observers, it did not receive more than 35 per cent of the vote and the rest was the result of rigging that took different forms. During the presidential poll Putin got officially around 64 per cent, whereas according to two independent watch dog organizations, Golos and Citizen-Observer, he got between 45 and 50 per cent. In Moscow Putin hardly got 40 per cent of the vote.
and responsibility, back into Russian politics. It was a drive for dignity, just like the initial protest during the Arab Spring had been. At the beginning most of the Russians taking to the streets oppose the authorities on moral and ethical grounds, however, were not ready to politicize their opposition and take part in a revolution against the system. It is the activeness of a diverse range of social and political groups with various ideas about politics and power united at the time by their rejection of Putin and his regime that have shaped the protests’ amorphous political content. The December movement has brought a new group of protest leaders to the fore, mostly civic activists and intellectuals, who have come to embody the ‘moral and ethical revolution’. The fact that these civic leaders are well-known people has helped to expand the movement and even make it trendy to join the protests. But the civic leadership’s nature, as well as the disparate makeup of the protest movement, inevitably limited the political agenda essentially to rallying behind the call for honest elections. Meanwhile, this is in itself a systemic slogan that cannot become the basis for consolidating the population around the idea of actually transforming the system. In any case, the civic leaders’ primary goal has been to influence the authorities, not to radically change the regime.

There is a number of reasons for the systemic nature of the December movement. People have become disillusioned with politics and all its instruments, first of all the political parties, including radical (‘anti-systemic’) opposition parties, and the public has grown tired of the leaders that emerged out of the 1990s. The political inexperience of the generation that began active life during Putin’s rule and took to the streets has also played a part. This group is enthusiastic about information technology and tends to see modern social media as the only (or the most important) possible means of mobilization neglecting or rejecting the need to build party networks and more structured forms of activity.

The December movement’s development has also been affected by the influence and tactics of the Kremlin, which, after coming round from the first shock, has tried to neutralize the protest radicalism through various means, including talk of holding negotiations between the civic leaders and the authorities, attempts to draw the protest movement into the authorities’ orbit, taking over its slogans (the authorities started rallying their supporters behind the ‘for clean elections’ slogan in a bid to neutralize the protest movement’s call ‘for honest elections’), and promising liberalization of the political system.

The Russian civic leaders’ rhetoric has been different to that seen in past movements such as the Polish KOS-KOR or Czechoslovak Charter 77, which politically motivated right from the start and made it their goal to change the principles on which the system was built. Czech Vaclav Havel or Polish Bronislaw Geremek did not emerge during the Russian “Snow Revolution”. The Russian civic activists who rose on the protest wave at the end of 2011 and the beginning of 2012 were not ready to build transformation priorities and were not ready to expand their political strategy once it became clear that the authorities were not going to satisfy any of their demands. Lack of consolidation among the political opposition groups, which have failed to overcome their old differences and disputes and offer the December movement more radical and structured demands, has also had an effect. As a result, despite quickly learning how to use protest technology and organize meetings and demonstrations, by the eve of the presidential election just around the corner the Russian “Snow Revolution” had started to fade and after the presidential elections (on March 5, 2012) the movement failed to move from tactical slogans to a strategy that would open the way to transformation of the system itself.

True, there have been some steps in this direction. Quite a few groups among the political opposition and protest movement recognized the need for constitutional reform as a key instrument for escaping from the Russian System. But even more important was the fact that the December movement has changed the Russian political atmosphere – it has proved that Russia is alive and it demonstrated that the regime has lost support of the big cities and first of all Moscow. The rebellion has started the process of de-legitimation of the regime and limited the Russian System time horizon. It has produced a new generation of activists, above all young people, who could become the nucleus of a new wave of protests. Furthermore, a mechanism has emerged for cooperation between various ideological and political parties and movements – liberals, moderate nationalists, and leftist groups – in the fight against Putin’s regime.

The end of the election cycle has made clear the need to now rethink the first stage of the protests and set about building a more solid platform for the next wave of activity, based this time on organized political movements. How fast this process will go depends on the Russia’s intellectual and political elite. We have to acknowledge one sad truth: Russia still lacks one of the most important dimensions that make the liberalization guaranteed. Joseph A. Schumpeter (1947, pp. 290–291) called it “human material of politics”, that is the people who manage the party machines, work in the executive branch, and take part in the broader political life and “should be of sufficient high quality.” Juan Linz (1997, p. 421), explaining what this “quality” means among several indicators mentioned “the commitment to some ... values or goals relevant for collectivity, without, however, pursuing them irrespectively of consequences”. The Russian "political class" with all its groupings in its majority is an open antithesis of what both Schumpeter and Linz mentioned.

In this context it is the political class that cannot bring itself to accept the uncertainty entailed by political competition and free elections that is the major stumbling block for transformation in Russia and not the society. One could mention that the elites in some other authoritarian states are not ready for liberal democracy either but they present more effective model of rule. For instance, China demonstrates, firstly, the attempts of the top authorities to moderate their grabbing instincts and try to exercise the idea of “good governance,” that is apparently the result of Confucianism influence, and secondly, we see there

---

5 “The basic issue was one of dignity, or the lack thereof, the feeling of worth or self-esteem that all of us seek,” wrote Francis Fukuyama (2012) analyzing the nature of the Arab protest. The same drive has been the catalyst of the Russian protests.
principle of meritocracy in building the bureaucracy (Fukuyama, 2011, p. 314). These qualities are absent in the Russian political class and its apparatus. But this could represent one of many Russian paradoxes: lack of the elites’ positive qualities can bring positive outcome by shortening the life of the Russian authoritarianism.

It still remains to analyze what is the reason of the Russian political elite demoralization: the lingering legacy of Communism (but then why the new European elites and the political class in the Baltic states have succeeded to demonstrate “sufficient high quality”) or the legacy of the 90s when under the liberal slogans the re-emergence of the new version of the Russian personalized rule took place? In any case, at the moment there are doubts that Russia will follow Robert Dahl prescription for the optimal way to a stable polyarchy which would be the rise of political competition among the elites, which would allow the culture of democracy to take root first among the political class and ruling team, which would then diffuse to a larger population, and gradually be incorporated into electoral politics (Dahl, 1971, pp. 33–35). In Russia, so far, we see rather clans struggle than “elite pluralism” that only strengthens the role of the arbitrary leader – as the arbitrator, that only discredits the idea of competitiveness, and the real political pluralism is emerging outside of the political system.

However, the December events brought hopes for emergence of the new political and intellectual stratum from among various society groups that will demonstrate its commitments to morale and normative values. But we still have to wait and see whether and when this really will happen and produce the political result. In any case, the quality of the Russian elites pushes the society toward deliberating on the revolution, as the most possible way to deal with the current system.

3. What the near future might bring

Russia’s political system might be able to hold on for a while longer, 5–10 years, perhaps, using various means such as the administrative, financial, and security resources that are still in the Kremlin’s hands. One has to take into account the entrenched interests of the ruling elite and its desire to preserve the status quo, and the existence of more conservative sections of society (around 30% of voters), who are completely dependent on the state and fear any change. The lack of a political alternative based on political organization (a party or movement), the absence of a new generation of leaders with broad public support, and an exit strategy (not just the method for dismantling the old system, but also a plan for building the new one) also makes it easier for the authorities to keep the system going. Also missing for now is another important political component that would get the ‘angry’ sections of society up and moving: willingness to consolidate around new strategy, be ready for an active political struggle and confrontation with the authorities, and readiness to make sacrifices in the name of reaching the desired change.

Finally, there are two more factors that could keep the system going for some time yet. The first is the hopes among parts of the political class for top-down economic reform that could halt the state’s degradation, re-energize the economy and lay the foundations for subsequent political liberalization. True, the number of people still entertaining such hopes seems to be dwindling. The second is the confidence that is emerging among some of the political elite that they will manage to set some limits on Putin’s rule and convince him to step down in 2018 which should open the ground for a new strategy and new scenario of development.

At the same time, we see that the political class has already lost control of the situation and events are now developing their own logic. The Russian System is no longer capable of responding to internal and global challenges, and throughout the ages such inability has always indicated a civilization’s imminent decline. Arnold Toynbee invented a pithy phrase for such process: the suicidal statecraft. What’s more, the ruling elite’s policies are actually undermining stability demonstrating that the system has started to ruin itself. Squeezing all pluralism from the political stage and closing down independent channels for expressing interests leaves people with no choice but to take to the streets, with ‘the street’ thus becoming the means of communication with the authorities. The authorities’ inevitable attempts to tighten the screws and suppress protests and even attempts at criticism can be effective in dampening the protest movement for a time, but ultimately, a policy of even just selective repression will fuel growing discontent, especially among young people, who are ready for confrontation with the authorities and are not afraid of state violence.

The unchanged leadership of Putin and his team was once seen as a guarantee of stability but now has become an irritant for the general public. The harder Putin tries to win back society’s support and prop up his crumbling base, the weaker and more vulnerable he ends up, making himself look in the public’s eyes as “Impotent Omnipotence” (Guillermo O’Donnell’s term that catches perfectly the substance of this type of leadership), and thus increases public willingness to look for an alternative to his government. The incessant flow of pro-Putin propaganda and mobilization of public sector workers to take part in official events organized to imitate support for Putin has only increased the rate at which those who supported him thus far are now joining the ranks of the discontented. Buying the population’s support and flooding them with propaganda worked for the Kremlin during the first stage of Putin’s rule keeping alive hopes for stability and economic growth, but today these methods have the opposite effect – increasingly alienating the public from the authorities.

The social surveys indicate that structural deficiencies in the system have become apparent and the people have started to realize it: the myth of sustainability of Putin’s Eldorado has burst. A survey in 2011 showed that 43% of respondents believed the country “is moving in the right direction”, and 38% thought it is “taking the wrong direction” (http://www.levada.ru/30-09-2011/sentyabrskie-reitingi-odobreniya-i-doveriya). The public showed no particular enthusiasm at the news that Putin was seeking a new term in office: 31% of respondents approved the move (these people make up the Putin regime’s core support base), 20% were not happy with the idea, and 41% said they had “no particular feelings about it.” 3% – “did not know”
Putin's personal popularity rating still has been high, but this 'Teflon president' phenomenon has its explanations: people in Russia realise that there is only one real institution in the country – the presidency, and part of the population is not ready to let Putin's rating take a tumble, fearing the chaos that might ensue. However, Russians' growing criticism of Putin's government and the country's general policy course shows that people have no real illusions about current regime.

The Russian public has become not only increasingly weary of Putin himself but also has started to reject the system's basic principles. Only 33% of respondents thought that "power should be concentrated in one pair of strong hands", while 59% of respondents took the view that "society should be built on the foundation of democratic freedom". In November 2011 24 per cent of respondents said that "the interests of the authorities and the society coincide", whereas 68 per cent said that they "do not coincide". People begin openly admitting their increasing discontent with the Kremlin's way of solving their everyday problems. Most Russians thought that the situation has worsened in all areas (with the exception of foreign policy). In December 2011 only 9 per cent of respondents said that the economic situation during 2011 has become better; 30 per cent said it became worse and 57 per cent did not see any changes.

Around 82% of respondents thought that corruption in Russia has increased or stayed at its old level. Almost half of the respondents believed they have lost rather than gained over these last years, although 51% of respondents said that, "life is hard but bearable". This willingness to endure and look for ways to survive rather than turn to open protest has been until now one of the main reasons for the country's apparent calm. Patience at least in the big cities has started to wane. Before December 2011 Duma elections 25% of respondents regarded mass protests as a possibility, and only 21% were willing to take part in them. These figures may look negligible, but they say that millions of people were ready for active protest.

After the elections the majority of Russians say that nothing will change. At the beginning of 2012 48 per cent of the respondents thought that the situation will remain the same, 14 per cent thought that it could get worse and only 33 per cent hoped it will become better which proves that the society does not hope any more that Putin and his leadership could bring positive change. According to another survey at the beginning of 2012, 29 per cent believe that political regime will become more tough, - 6 per cent believed that it could become less tough; (take out: 34 per cent said that administrative control over business will increase, - 8 per cent said that it will decrease); 19 per cent said that situation with freedoms will become better, - 16 per cent insisted that it will become worse); and 26 per cent said that trust toward Putin will decline. - 16 per cent thought it will rise.

Discussing the outcomes of the elections, the Russian experts came to conclusion that around 35 per cent of the Russian citizens do not recognize these elections as being legitimate and the feelings of indignation and anger with respect to the Kremlin continues which could take new open forms of protest in the future.

Russia is once more proving the 'Russian axiom': the authorities have never been ready for and capable of undertaking the reforms needed to prevent a mass explosion, and the personalized power system's suicidal policy has only ever served to hasten revolution, which ends up being the only means of forcing from power a regime that will not leave the stage voluntarily. True, each Russian revolution that has swept unwanted regimes from power has only ended up reproducing the underlying system, perpetuating personalized power in a new guise and giving it new legitimacy. Russian society has shown that over the last decade it has undergone a significant evolution from seeking for a new Leader and Saviour to growing criticism of Putin's personal popularity rating still has been high, but this 'Teflon president' phenomenon has its explanations: people in Russia realise that there is only one real institution in the country – the presidency, and part of the population is not ready to let Putin's rating take a tumble, fearing the chaos that might ensue. However, Russians' growing criticism of Putin's government and the country's general policy course shows that people have no real illusions about current regime.

The Russian public has become not only increasingly weary of Putin himself but also has started to reject the system's basic principles. Only 33% of respondents thought that "power should be concentrated in one pair of strong hands", while 59% of respondents took the view that "society should be built on the foundation of democratic freedom". In November 2011 24 per cent of respondents said that "the interests of the authorities and the society coincide", whereas 68 per cent said that they "do not coincide". People begin openly admitting their increasing discontent with the Kremlin's way of solving their everyday problems. Most Russians thought that the situation has worsened in all areas (with the exception of foreign policy). In December 2011 only 9 per cent of respondents said that the economic situation during 2011 has become better; 30 per cent said it became worse and 57 per cent did not see any changes.

Around 82% of respondents thought that corruption in Russia has increased or stayed at its old level. Almost half of the respondents believed they have lost rather than gained over these last years, although 51% of respondents said that, "life is hard but bearable". This willingness to endure and look for ways to survive rather than turn to open protest has been until now one of the main reasons for the country's apparent calm. Patience at least in the big cities has started to wane. Before December 2011 Duma elections 25% of respondents regarded mass protests as a possibility, and only 21% were willing to take part in them. These figures may look negligible, but they say that millions of people were ready for active protest.

After the elections the majority of Russians say that nothing will change. At the beginning of 2012 48 per cent of the respondents thought that the situation will remain the same, 14 per cent thought that it could get worse and only 33 per cent hoped it will become better which proves that the society does not hope any more that Putin and his leadership could bring positive change. According to another survey at the beginning of 2012, 29 per cent believe that political regime will become more tough, - 6 per cent believed that it could become less tough; (take out: 34 per cent said that administrative control over business will increase, - 8 per cent said that it will decrease); 19 per cent said that situation with freedoms will become better, - 16 per cent insisted that it will become worse); and 26 per cent said that trust toward Putin will decline. - 16 per cent thought it will rise.

Discussing the outcomes of the elections, the Russian experts came to conclusion that around 35 per cent of the Russian citizens do not recognize these elections as being legitimate and the feelings of indignation and anger with respect to the Kremlin continues which could take new open forms of protest in the future.

Russia is once more proving the 'Russian axiom': the authorities have never been ready for and capable of undertaking the reforms needed to prevent a mass explosion, and the personalized power system's suicidal policy has only ever served to hasten revolution, which ends up being the only means of forcing from power a regime that will not leave the stage voluntarily. True, each Russian revolution that has swept unwanted regimes from power has only ended up reproducing the underlying system, perpetuating personalized power in a new guise and giving it new legitimacy. Russian society has shown that over the last decade it has undergone a significant evolution from seeking for a new Leader and Saviour to growing criticism of Putin's personal popularity rating still has been high, but this 'Teflon president' phenomenon has its explanations: people in Russia realise that there is only one real institution in the country – the presidency, and part of the population is not ready to let Putin's rating take a tumble, fearing the chaos that might ensue. However, Russians' growing criticism of Putin's government and the country's general policy course shows that people have no real illusions about current regime.

The Russian public has become not only increasingly weary of Putin himself but also has started to reject the system's basic principles. Only 33% of respondents thought that "power should be concentrated in one pair of strong hands", while 59% of respondents took the view that "society should be built on the foundation of democratic freedom". In November 2011 24 per cent of respondents said that "the interests of the authorities and the society coincide", whereas 68 per cent said that they "do not coincide". People begin openly admitting their increasing discontent with the Kremlin's way of solving their everyday problems. Most Russians thought that the situation has worsened in all areas (with the exception of foreign policy). In December 2011 only 9 per cent of respondents said that the economic situation during 2011 has become better; 30 per cent said it became worse and 57 per cent did not see any changes.

Around 82% of respondents thought that corruption in Russia has increased or stayed at its old level. Almost half of the respondents believed they have lost rather than gained over these last years, although 51% of respondents said that, "life is hard but bearable". This willingness to endure and look for ways to survive rather than turn to open protest has been until now one of the main reasons for the country's apparent calm. Patience at least in the big cities has started to wane. Before December 2011 Duma elections 25% of respondents regarded mass protests as a possibility, and only 21% were willing to take part in them. These figures may look negligible, but they say that millions of people were ready for active protest.

After the elections the majority of Russians say that nothing will change. At the beginning of 2012 48 per cent of the respondents thought that the situation will remain the same, 14 per cent thought that it could get worse and only 33 per cent hoped it will become better which proves that the society does not hope any more that Putin and his leadership could bring positive change. According to another survey at the beginning of 2012, 29 per cent believe that political regime will become more tough, - 6 per cent believed that it could become less tough; (take out: 34 per cent said that administrative control over business will increase, - 8 per cent said that it will decrease); 19 per cent said that situation with freedoms will become better, - 16 per cent insisted that it will become worse); and 26 per cent said that trust toward Putin will decline. - 16 per cent thought it will rise.

Discussing the outcomes of the elections, the Russian experts came to conclusion that around 35 per cent of the Russian citizens do not recognize these elections as being legitimate and the feelings of indignation and anger with respect to the Kremlin continues which could take new open forms of protest in the future.

Russia is once more proving the 'Russian axiom': the authorities have never been ready for and capable of undertaking the reforms needed to prevent a mass explosion, and the personalized power system's suicidal policy has only ever served to hasten revolution, which ends up being the only means of forcing from power a regime that will not leave the stage voluntarily. True, each Russian revolution that has swept unwanted regimes from power has only ended up reproducing the underlying system, perpetuating personalized power in a new guise and giving it new legitimacy. Russian society has shown that over the last decade it has undergone a significant evolution from seeking for a new Leader and Saviour to growing awareness of the need for new principles and basic rules. Russia today has essentially come to the conclusion formulated in his time by Hayek: We need fixed rules of the game, not fixers. A large part of Russian society today realizes that the problem is not in the leaders, but in the principles upon which government and state power are built. It is not yet clear when a responsible force for change might emerge that could set the system on a new foundation of the rule of law. But the intellectual and political trend in society is heading in this direction, even if still with inconsistency and often naivety for now.

Dramatic turns of events are still possible ahead: attempts by the Kremlin to hold onto power by force, attempts by the system to keep itself going by changing its leader, and attempts to build a new system without the necessary preparation, reflection, and public support. Finally, the system’s crisis could provoke its collapse before a real political alternative has developed and throw the country into a period of chaos.

---

6 One also has to take into account that as the other polls prove respondents not always say truth and their attitude to the leaders could be even worse.
Russia has entered a new stage in its development, a stage in which much remains unclear and the future is hard to predict as far as finding an exit road from the past is concerned. What’s more, Russia has begun its latest search for a way out of its old matrix at a most unfavourable junction in history – when Western civilization is traversing a crisis in its model, leading many to doubt the relevance of liberal-democratic values today. At the same time, there have been no successful examples of transformation in recent history achieved without the West’s direct or indirect support.

One final circumstance that without doubt will influence Russia’s trajectory is its nuclear power status, which complicates (and perhaps even makes it impossible) taking the transformation path that many democratic countries have followed, that of directly tying itself to Europe and limiting its sovereignty. Russia will have to find its own road toward openness and the rule of law, and this will inevitably be a difficult and contradictory undertaking.

Russia has not yet set out on this road, but it is already waking up to the fact that the old model has exhausted its potential.

References