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Simulations of Power in Putin’s Russia

STEPHEN HOLMES

President Vladimir Putin’s “consolidation of vertical power” bewilders observers even more than it impresses Russia’s citizens. What tactics has Putin used to advance it? Who backs it and who defies it? How far has it gone? How much further can it go? What does he intend to do with the power he is recompressing in the hands of central authorities? Which partial interests profit most from a reinvigorated central state? Which groups have suffered the gravest losses from this renewed engrossing of power? These and related mysteries demand unraveling. But I wish to pose a slightly different, and perhaps prior, question: How can we distinguish a genuine from a merely apparent consolidation of power?

Putin’s style of rule is outwardly unlike Boris Yeltsin’s. But has the underlying situation that helped fragment political power between 1991 and 1999 radically changed? By the underlying situation I mean, essentially, the disproportion between the meager tools of effective governance available to the center, and the massive and intractable problems facing it. This disproportion naturally generates two strong and mutually reinforcing tendencies in the Kremlin: first, to wash the central government’s hands of unsolvable problems, unloading them on hapless local officials; and second, to purchase desperately needed cooperation from lesser power-wielders by granting them unsupervised carte blanche within local domains. This is a familiar tactic for overwhelmed and underequipped central authorities to adopt. But if the deconsolidation

of power during the 1990s has such “objective” roots, it cannot be blamed on Yeltsin’s ineffectiveness alone. If the disintegration of power before Putin’s accession was not a failure of wit or nerve but the result of unmasterable forces, then Putin himself will not be able to reconsolidate power by “political will” or by appointing a handful of “supergovernors,” although he may be able to deceive careless observers by organizing Potemkin consolidations accompanied by the Soviet anthem.

HOPE, FEAR, AND DOUBT

Surveying the field, we can identify three rival schools of thought about Putin’s presumed consolidation of power. These are the school of hope, the school of fear, and the school of doubt. Adherents of the school of hope allege that Putin is a liberal in authoritarian clothing. They see him as a “reformer” and “pragmatist” struggling to establish new rules of the game, stanch capital flight, knock some sense into the predatory elite, introduce political stability and legal certainty, shield ordinary citizens from racketeers and bribe-taking officials, and encourage investments. Fair-minded observers must admit that some evidence supports this optimistic view.

Exponents of the school of fear draw a diametrically opposite conclusion from nearly the same set of facts. They argue that Putin is an authoritarian in liberal clothing. They see him as a KGB strongman and master of disguises. He may have rented a few liberal advisers as *trompe l’oeil* cabinet dressing, but he is obsessed with secrecy and bristles at the slightest criticism, however justified or constructive. He has restricted the independent monitoring of government agencies and chilled most critical voices in the media. He has even attempted to fill the space

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vacated by genuine civil-society organizations with cardboard replicas that do the state's bidding. Fair-minded observers must admit that there is some evidence for this view as well.

Both the school of hope and the school of fear can showcase bits of evidence to establish their contrasting takes on Putin and his regime. This surface credibility of blatantly contradictory interpretations is a revealing fact in itself. Perhaps Russia is now balanced on razor's edge, ready to stumble in either a liberal or authoritarian direction. Indeed, the country today does resemble an ambiguous halfway house. Some social voices have been repressed while others still flourish; a number of civil-society organizations have been snuffed out while many, especially when compared to Soviet times, remain alive and kicking. Putin's Russia, in other words, raises a variant on that classic question: is the cemetery of civil society half empty or half full? And the answer, as usual, is that it all depends on how you look at it.

To rise above this sterile back-and-forth, it helps to examine a third perspective. Alongside the schools of hope and fear, we find the school of doubt. Advocates of this warier approach allege that changing the man at the top does not really change that much, because the underlying situation remains forbiddingly difficult. Fear and hope engender pessimistic and optimistic points of view; but if we look past the panic and the public relations, we will discover neither authoritarianism nor liberalism but an intermittently confused and often paralyzed Kremlin that continues to respond haphazardly to events outside its control, including centrifugal pressures that have not noticeably slackened over the past few years.

Before making a case for the school of doubt, I want to interject a word of caution. It is very difficult to estimate the power of a state in a situation where the irritants that it combats and occasionally eliminates are intrinsically weak and defenseless, where the plants that it plucks out have embarrassingly shallow roots (it does not take much force to rip out a rootless plant). Forcing Vladimir Gusinsky into exile or taking over his television channel, NTV, is not especially difficult. Such coups de main, as a consequence, do not evince massive power. If Putin could discipline the Procuracy, or if he could whip into shape another such well-organized and entrenched vested interest, then we would be on safer ground when acknowledging his consolidation of vertical power. In any case, to estimate Putin's success as a consolidator of power, we need to take the measure of the resistance he is rolling over. If this resistance is noisy but essentially feeble

and defenseless, we should hesitate to join the choruses of praise and blame for his recentralizing of formerly strewn powers.

SMOKE AND MIRRORS

To understand the basic political dynamic in Putin's Russia, it is essential to grasp that authoritarianism is just as difficult to set in motion as democracy. It may or may not have authoritarian ambitions, but does Putin's team have authoritarian resources and authoritarian skills? Adherents of the school of fear have warned of the worst, but they have not been able to demonstrate that the Kremlin is capable of imposing authoritarian discipline on Russian society. Ruling with an iron fist is not as easy as it sounds, especially when the iron is corroded and the arm has multiple fractures. Without an inspiring ideology to rally supporters or money to pay soldiers and police officers a living wage, the government's authoritarian options are modest. A genuine restoration of Soviet-style rule, moreover, would require a resealing of the borders or at least a drastic scaling back of currently unfettered contacts with the West. Such a reversion to autarky is unlikely. Not only would it strike directly at material interests of influential individuals in the Russian establishment, but it would also leave Russia alone with problems (such as maintaining the country's territorial integrity despite a militarily exposed southern flank) that cannot be confronted without serious Western help over the long haul.

The problem facing would-be authoritarian factions in the Kremlin (assuming they exist) has nothing to do with a rebellious mobilization from below. An autocratic restoration in today's Russia is not blocked by the stubborn resistance of democratic forces, who remain poorly organized and basically ineffective. Creating an authoritarian regime in Russia is difficult for a very different reason. The fundamental obstacle, to repeat, is the disproportion between the country's daunting problems and the inadequacy of the tools and resources available to the Kremlin. By the vastness of problems, I mean something that innumerable observers and experts have described in sickening detail, namely a massive crisis of deferred maintenance in 11 time zones—the crisis of demodernization that ranges from a public health disaster to rivers choked by pollution and includes a seemingly unstoppable rotting away of transportation infrastructure, the educational system, and other basic public services. By the weakness of tools, I mean especially the disorganization and incompetence of federal bureaucracies, the

result of a decade of hemorrhaging talent, low pay, collapsing morale, and unclear chains of command.

When celebrating or denouncing Putin's "consolidation of vertical power," most commentators focus on his strengthening of the executive branch at the expense of the legislature and regional authorities. The most economical way to challenge the assumptions shared by optimists and pessimists, therefore, is to stress another aspect of the problem, namely the pathological level of fragmentation inside the executive branch itself. Executive agencies and ministries that habitually conceal essential information from each other and work at cross-purposes tend to produce incoherent and self-defeating policies, to seize up in periodic deadlocks, to react dangerously slowly to unexpected crises. That Putin's ministries do not always sing from the same songbook is clear from continuing tensions between the Central Bank and the Finance Ministry; ceaseless rivalries among the Ministry of Justice, the Procuracy, and the Judiciary; and ongoing turf wars among the Ministry of Defense, the Foreign Ministry, and the General Staff. When failures of coordination inside the executive reach such proportions, they signal state weakness. They suggest not a consolidation but a progressive degeneration of vertical power.

If Putin proves able to streamline, rationalize, and coordinate relations inside the executive branch and among his central ministries and executive agencies, then (who could deny it?) he will have made serious progress toward consolidating vertical power. He is obviously trying. But evidence of success in his power-coordinating venture is mixed; bets are still out. So Russia watchers should beware of smoke and mirrors. The essential point to remember is that it is easier to display the outward symbols of consolidated power than to create the real thing, especially when Russian journalists and other sources of information are ominously "encouraged" to accept uncritically the Kremlin's varnish on events.

For this and other reasons, power in Russia is an elusive subject of research, not to mention nearly impossible to measure. In Russia especially, a vital component of power is the ability to glide under the radar. That is to say, the capacity to conceal one's power is itself a source or perhaps a form of power. Moreover, the opposite is also true. A facility for bluffing, skill at convincingly exaggerating one's power, is an equally important source or form of

power. As a consequence, students of power in Russia, of its successful or abortive consolidation, must become familiar with subterfuge and dissimulation, must learn to cultivate disbelief when besieged by storytellers, impostors, and camouflage artists.

A specifically Russian aspect of the artfully concocted "reputation for power" and its real-world effects is also worth mentioning in this context. Western observers of the last parliamentary election were puzzled by the way Sergei Dorenko, a journalist friendly to the Kremlin, publicly accused Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov of all manner of crimes, including murder. How could anyone have believed this inexpressibly vulgar parody of *compromat* (compromising or scandalous material that can be released to discredit political rivals or kept under lock and key to encourage compliant behavior)? The answer is revealing. Dorenko had no intention of broadcasting believable charges. Indeed, the whole point

of vilifying Luzhkov was to illustrate the impunity with which the Kremlin could publicize outlandish charges against its would-be electoral challengers. If

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the Kremlin permitted itself to treat the Moscow mayor so unjustly, this was visible proof that the Kremlin was strong and that Luzhkov was weak. Such was the subliminal message that many foreigners missed. To the average Russian listener, the truth of the charges was close to irrelevant; what mattered was the relative strength of the two parties disclosed by the audacity and insouciance with which the charges were leveled. Bandwagoning followed. If you have a choice, whose team do you join, the winners' or the losers'? In Russia (although not only there), vulnerable citizens, living from hand to mouth, massively prefer to align with probable winners. This bandwagoning strategy is so popular because it serves as an insurance policy of sorts.

BOSS OR BROKER?

Putin and his team continue to emit a stream of "I am in charge" messages to the listening world. But this eulogistic self-presentation is undermined by the Kremlin's palpable anxiety about bad publicity. Putin seems especially upset when the broadcast media reveal the flagrant incompetence of government officials. He was bitter, allegedly, about the way independent television allowed the country to observe the panicky reaction of officials to the tragedy of the sinking of the *Kursk* submarine. This skittish reaction makes one wonder. Anxiety about

being criticized unfairly can be a symptom. It strongly suggests subjectively perceived weakness.

The first response of Putin's Kremlin to the incompetence of state officials, in fact, is not to fix the problem and improve the quality of public services. On the contrary, Putin's first response is to make the state even more illegible. Indeed, it sometimes seems that his main strategy for state building—that is, his principal technique for “consolidating vertical power”—is a press blackout. Perhaps his extraordinary (and self-defeating?) need for secrecy is not merely a residue of his KGB training but is also a clue. It suggests that he recognizes how weak his government remains. It may also suggest that he is aiming to conjure real power in the future by fabricating the illusion of power now. To admit that this tactic may conceivably work is not to agree that it already has.

Estimating the power of any government so passionately devoted to secrecy and dissimulation is a challenge for observers, both domestic and foreign.

One simple way to approach the issue is to survey the major centers of power outside the Kremlin, including the gubernatorial bureaucracies (such as Moscow city government), the so-called oligarchs, the regional industrialists, the natural monopolies, and the militarized central ministries (which are responsive to the Kremlin but not completely under its thumb). There may be others that are not listed here, but one power center more or less would not change the basic questions that need to be asked. How much weaker are these rivals to the Kremlin today than they were under Yeltsin? How much of their previous power have they ceded to the Kremlin? Which locally supported authorities have really been unhorsed by pressure from the top? To investigate concrete shifts in relative power is difficult, admittedly, and requires us to ask: power to do what? and power over whom? It also requires us to ask if an ostensibly curbed power wielder really wants to do what he has now been “prevented” from doing. Did the governors, for instance, really want to serve in the Federation Council? What did they concretely gain from such a perch? Has Putin's success at ousting them from that body actually decreased their capacity to pursue local or personal interests, especially when these conflict with national interests as defined by the Kremlin? Was Russia's president compelled to grant constitutionally dubious third terms

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to certain incumbent governors to purchase their acquiescence to his reconfiguring of the old Federation Council? Such questions deserve more serious study than they have yet received.

Another complication concerns Putin's relation to his former (?) employer. Is the *spetszluzhba* or special service his tool, or is he theirs? Do FSB—that is, Federal Security Service, or former KGB—higher-ups snap to attention when he calls? Or are they holding him hostage and playing him like a violin? And if the answer is neither, as is probable, then the cloudy status of the FSB itself reveals volumes about the extent to which Putin has, or has not, consolidated vertical power.

A parallel question can be raised about the oligarchs. Has Putin truly destroyed their power or has he simply made them less noisy? Has he forced them to keep their heads down, made them feel slightly less secure while nevertheless leaving them to savor most of their ill-gotten wealth? And what residual powers of sabotage, of indirect resistance, do they

and other powers outside the Kremlin retain? The power to sabotage, by its very nature, is very hard to track, not to mention to measure with any

accuracy. Both the saboteur and the sabotaged have an incentive to hide from public scrutiny the extent of damage done.

But the main point is another. To gauge the genuine or illusory quality of Putin's “consolidation of vertical power” is to answer the following question: does Russia's current president more resemble a boss or a broker? To call the shots in Primorsky Krai or Sverdlovsk, at Gazprom, Minatom, or the Central Bank, in the General Staff and the Procuracy or any other executive agency or ministry, the Kremlin must be able to replace the holdover cadres who still run things today with new cadres unswervingly loyal to Putin. To consolidate vertical power, the Kremlin needs a reliable staff as well as extensive oversight capacities to keep operational officers steadily in line. Does the Kremlin have such an extended staff and such oversight capacities? Can it replenish the federal bureaucracy with talented and loyal personnel? If it does not and cannot, it will have to back off its pretences to iron-fisted control. That is to say, without an enormous cadre of reliable Putinites, the president will have to give up trying to be a benevolent or malevolent boss and will necessarily lapse into acting as

a broker, not unlike Yeltsin. He will stop giving orders and start hammering out compromises and bargains. Being a broker, admittedly, does not exclude pretending to be a boss. Adherents of the school of doubt would describe the situation in today's Russia basically in these terms.

THE RULE OF LAW: RHETORIC AND REALITY

An important test for Putin's capacity to deliver on his promise to reconsolidate or recentralize political power is the campaign currently under way to strengthen the court system and foster the rule of law. Jury trials will be extended to all subjects of the Russian Federation, for example, and arrests will require procurators to obtain a court warrant. The so-called Kozak plan (announced in spring 2001 by Dmitri Kozak, a Putin confidant from St. Petersburg and currently deputy head of the presidential administration) is designed to create a legal environment that is welcoming to investment—not foreign investment only or even especially, but rather domestic investment—and of course to quash capital flight, tax evasion, bribery, and so forth.

There is a grave problem, however, with the legal reform ostensibly in progress. To put through a reform of this magnitude, the Kremlin needs voluntary cooperation from the main actors in the legal system, including the Procuracy, who must accept the basic principles of the reform if it is to be successful. One of the most important players on the current scene, of course, is the FSB. The problem with the FSB, so far as Putin's announced legal reform is concerned, is quite simple. The FSB's main strategy for ruling is to inject uncertainty into people's lives. Fomenting uncertainty, keeping people off balance, is one way it maintains its domination. Recent events strongly suggest that this is a highly self-conscious approach. The FSB realizes that a population that feels secure is more difficult to control than one that feels insecure. Indeed, if a property holder feels secure in his property, guess what he will do. He will employ that property as a platform from which to attack the government. He will use it as a staging ground from which to expose the Kremlin's stupidities and even crimes. He will create an NTV.

Therefore, however eloquently the Kremlin speaks about the need to stabilize property rights, its ability to follow through and render property holders secure remains dubious. Can the Kremlin reliably stabilize property rights while repeatedly destabilizing its current and potential critics? Its capacity to target insecurity so accurately, to deliver uncertainty so selectively, is questionable. And therefore the Krem-

lin's real, rather than merely rhetorical, commitment to the rule of law remains unknown, whatever its spokesmen publicly proclaim.

The motives of, or incentives facing, entrenched government bureaucracies are also relevant to the likely success of Putin's legal reform. These inherited bureaucracies can be usefully described as orphans forsaken by the now-defunct Soviet Communist Party. As fragments broken off from the old system, the FSB and the Procuracy have been loosed from Communist Party superintendence. But they are institutions populated by human beings and have therefore developed strong corporate interests of their own, interests that do not necessarily overlap with those of the Kremlin and that are not necessarily compatible with the rule of law in any recognizable sense.

Where will Putin find a well-organized constituency inside the country to support the rule of law? What government agency has a strong incentive to make its own behavior predictable? To this question about the government we need to add a parallel question about the private sector: what profit seeker has a strong motive to stop asking for ad hoc exemptions and special help and to start asking for rules that will be reliably enforced by independent courts? Do such legally minded profit-seekers exist in Russia? Will Russia's rich begin to view Russia's court system in the same amiable way as other privileged groups around the world view their national courts, that is, as more or less effective debt-collection agencies, designed to help the wealthy keep their money? There is scant sign of such a revolutionary change in Russian elite attitudes toward binding legality and judicial authority. Russia's somewhat chastened but still rapacious oligarchs claim to have been converted to the rule of law, of course. But talk is cheap. Why should we believe them if we know they have an interest in deceiving us? Remember that most if not all the truly wealthy Russians have accumulated their wealth under murky and shifting rules that have been fairly easy to evade. They have good reasons to believe that their own rude skills of acquisition would lose value in a system where clear rules were reliably enforced by independent agencies. And they would not be wrong to fear that, under such a system, the skills of foreigners, raised in rule-of-law environments, would gain in relative value. So why would most Russian businessmen support the introduction of the rule of law, rather than merely pay lip service to the idea?

For the rule of law to emerge, two conditions must coincide: power wielders must have an incen-

tive to make their own power predictable, and profit seekers must have an incentive to ask for general rules rather than special deals. If this generalization has any merit, then what is the chance that the rule of law will emerge in Putin's Russia? If the FSB cannot renounce unpredictability, and the oligarchs cannot renounce special deals, how will Putin cobble together a political coalition favoring the rule of law? Where will he find support for this aspect of his consolidation of vertical power? In my judgment, no well-organized constituency for a rule-of-law system exists in Russia today. Putin may sincerely want to introduce the rule of law. He may repeatedly announce that he is going to create it. He may speechify and issue a river of decrees. But his subjective intentions are neither here nor there. The rule of law is going to emerge only if strong constituencies support it. And what students of Putinism need to ask is: where, inside Russia, is he going to locate such political support?

If Putin is having a difficult time forming a political coalition of well-organized social forces to support his attractive-sounding reforms, this is because no powerful groups with a palpable interest in the desired outcome currently exist. But is Putin able to at least foster a stable investment climate in the country? The school of doubt suggests the following tentative answer: Putin's sway will diminish outright defiance of vertical power while manufacturing a simulacrum of societal order. But it will not effect the rule of law, despite the latter's foreseeable benefits, because the Kremlin repeatedly will be cornered into making special deals with powerful financial interests. After a few false dawns, Putin too will fail to improve the investment climate significantly because his reliance on the FSB will compel him to accept citizen uncertainty as the price for establishing and maintaining order. Pervasive insecurity will make long-term investment unattractive, effectively undermining efforts at stabilization undertaken with the best of intentions in other domains.

CATERING TO THE "HOVERCRAFT ELITE"

A final point concerns the elusive power of public opinion in today's Russia, something that continues to vex political commentators, both domestic and foreign. Putin apparently believes that his popularity is an important instrument of rule, a significant source of power. At least that is one plausible explanation for his decision to channel recent oil wind-

falls to pay pensions, despite the elderly's negligible capacity to make trouble for the state. When Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov became extremely popular in 1999, moreover, the Kremlin decided that he had to be destroyed politically. That is to say, the Kremlin consistently behaves as if popularity—and that means public opinion—is a significant political force. This is true even though "the street" is obviously not an important route to power in Russia. Elites do not fear the mob. Demagogues are not even worth jailing or beating. The people at large are disillusioned and alienated from politics, which they accurately view as an insider's game. Russia's citizens are not players in the political system. They are not even especially attentive spectators.

So what can we say about the power of popularity and public opinion in Putin's Russia? And how will it affect the success or failure of the Kremlin's attempt to consolidate vertical power? Perhaps the strongest case for continuity, rather than rupture, between Yeltsinism and Putinism can be made by stressing the still-tenuous connection between the country's elite and the general public. Under Yeltsin, power was in the hands of Russia's "hovercraft elite," its democratically unaccountable ruling and profiteering groups. Under Putin the same pattern prevails. The rich and powerful remain essentially detached from the population and are focused on their own well-being. The Russian elite, such as it is, can stage democratic rituals but it has no interest in consulting regularly with civil society. Admittedly, the identity of influential groups may change occasionally. Repressive elites may assume a somewhat higher profile while extractive elites may periodically scamper under the table. And these relations will no doubt shift again in unpredictable ways. But experience suggests that, although the identity of power wielders changes from year to year, we will not soon witness the emergence of a form of power accountable to ordinary Russian citizens. The state will remain detached and nonresponsive to society. It will remain a "corporation" that, however wracked by internal struggles, basically looks after itself. This lack of accountability of the Russian state to Russian society appears to be the one steady point in an ever-churning world. If Putin, against the odds, succeeds, he will consolidate unaccountable power. If he fails, which appears more likely at this point, unaccountable power will remain fragmented and dispersed. ■