

Paradoxes of Putinism

Timothy J. Colton

Abstract: Vladimir Putin's trademark since taking charge of Russia's government almost two decades ago has been stability. He has achieved much in terms of this master goal, including economic and demographic recovery. But development on the part of Russian society has been juxtaposed with growing rigidity and control-mindedness on the part of the state. The accumulation of economic, social, and foreign-policy problems in recent years naturally raises questions about the sustainability of the current regime. Paradoxically, Putin's personal popularity has not always been matched by confidence in his policies, although the 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine gave that confidence a boost. Another paradox is that Russia bucks the global trend that seemingly links social and economic modernization to political democratization. The essays in this issue that follow will probe dimensions of this knot of puzzles.

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From day one, the declared priority of Russia's second president – it is no exaggeration to call it a sacred priority for him – was to engineer political and social stability. His chosen course reflected the instinctive embrace of control for control's sake of a career *silovik*, the Russian catchword for an associate or veteran of the security and military services. But Vladimir Putin also took a more philosophical view. Disorder was not only inherently undesirable, he affirmed in the “Millennium Manifesto” published in his name on the eve of his appointment as acting president on December 31, 1999, but was a stumbling block to normal life and development – and nowhere more than in Russia, given its tumultuous history. Although Communism had its accomplishments, on the whole, in Putin's estimation, it had proven a recipe for keeping the Soviet Union backward and out of the global mainstream. As the way out, Putin rejected the “shakeups, cataclysms, and total makeovers” that accompanied the Communists to power and defined Russia's twentieth century. The twenty-first century demanded a forward-looking “strategy for . . . revival and prosperity . . . based on all the positives created in the [world-

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wide] process of market and democratic reforms and implemented by evolutionary, gradual, and balanced methods.”¹

The key mechanism for inculcating all these good things was at the heart of Putinism: namely, rehabilitation and consolidation of the rump Russian state, so diminished by the jarring transition from Soviet power. The most-quoted passages of the 1999 manifesto left no doubts on this score: “Russia will not soon if ever become a second edition of, say, the United States or Britain, where liberal values have deep historical roots. For us, the state, its institutions, and its structures have always played an exceptionally important role.” “A strong and effective state” was not an anomaly or a nuisance in Russia but “the font . . . of order and the initiator and main driving force of change.” “Society wants to see the guiding and regulating role of the state replenished to the appropriate degree, in accordance with the traditions and present condition of the country.” “Our hopes for a worthy future,” Putin added, “will work out only if we prove capable of combining the universal principles of a market economy and democracy with Russian realities.”²

Time would tell that the devil was in the details and in the meaning of “to the appropriate degree” and “Russian realities.” Putin as savior of the state sank much of his presidential effort in the early going into buttressing its infrastructure. He installed fellow *siloviki* in high- and middle-level positions to keep a wary eye on civilians. The military rematch against separatist rebels in the North Caucasus republic of Chechnya, the Russian army having walked away from a first war in 1996, was prosecuted in gruesome fashion and won. Tax collection was tightened, the budget was brought into balance and then into surplus, and money surrogates gave way to robust rubles. The ranks of the governmental workforce swelled and its pay and morale were en-

hanced. There were faltering attempts to modernize the armed forces (a more serious wave started in 2008, after the army’s indifferent performance in a five-day conflict with neighboring Georgia). Stricter controls were exercised over the country’s revised borders. Outside of them, Russian foreign policy took a more assertive and a more risk-acceptant turn.

It was soon clear that Putin was as fixated on discrete parts of the state apparatus as on the state in general. Boris Yeltsin before him had negotiated with the eighty-odd constituent regions of the Russian Federation, granting them considerable leeway in exchange for loyalty and delivering the vote in national elections, and let their leaders be popularly elected. Putin fortified the central government and the “power vertical” binding the provincial governors to it,³ lessened though did not wipe out their autonomy, and sponsored legislation that made them in effect presidential appointees. In Moscow, Putin shored up the executive branch, above all the presidency and its administrative household, at the expense of the legislature. To accomplish this, he extended his reach into the State Duma, the lower and more significant of the two houses of parliament, through a “party of power,” United Russia, founded under his auspices in 2001. In the Duma election of 2003, United Russia won 38 percent of the popular vote and an even 50 percent of the seats; in 2007, it got 64 percent of the votes cast and 70 percent of the seats.

The bolstering of the machinery of state cannot be disentangled from purposive efforts to maximize state influence vis-à-vis Russian society at large. The party of power’s parliamentary majority enabled it to enact laws impeding the registration of new political parties and the survival of older ones. Parties and quasiparties were pared in number from more than two hundred in the late 1990s to seven. In the same vein, Putin’s government seized control of national tele-

vision in 2000 – 2001 and recast news programming on the big channels as one long infomercial on its behalf. Disobliging members of the emerging business elite were brought to heel, as Russia's wealthiest oligarch, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, was arrested in 2003 and put on trial for tax evasion and theft; he would remain behind bars until 2013.⁴ On the heels of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, blamed by Moscow on the nefarious work of foreign-funded organizations, the Kremlin stepped up administrative oversight of Russian nongovernmental organizations and the harassment of the more politically attuned of them, and it chartered conformist mass associations for young people.

First elected president in March 2000 with 53 percent of the popular vote, Putin was re-elected in March 2004 with an overwhelming 72 percent of the vote. Even if falsification accounted for a portion of the tally (not a decisive one, so far as is known), there is no denying that he enjoyed abundant mass support. This was borne out time and again by public opinion polls conducted by pro-government and independent experts alike. Putin's favorability scores continued to sail along at impressive levels after 2004.

The reasons for this popularity were many, ranging from Putin's personal style and carefully groomed media image to his attractiveness to specific social groupings (women and non-Russian minorities, for instance) and his identification with a visceral reaction against the roller-coaster politics of the 1980s and 1990s. A muscular foreign policy delivered a measure of geopolitical deference and public awareness that Russia stood taller in Eurasian and world affairs than it had since the dissolution of the Soviet superpower. Whereas only 31 percent of Russians in one poll in 1999 felt Russia had the status of a great power (*velikaya derzhava*), that proportion reached 53 percent in 2007 and 65 percent in November 2015.

In tangible terms, nothing did more to boost Putin's standing than the dramatic recovery of the national economy. The rebound was abetted by the delayed effects of Yeltsin's messy reforms; by a short neoliberal burst in the early 2000s, including streamlined regulation of small business in the name of reducing corruption, a cut in personal income tax to a flat 13 percent, and legalization of the private ownership of land; and by sound macroeconomic and fiscal policy under Putin and his finance minister, Aleksei Kudrin. Russia's economic health also gained massively from the serendipity of a bull market for its most precious natural resource, oil, the price of which soared from below \$10 per barrel in 1998 (the year Russia defaulted on its sovereign debt obligations) to \$50 in 2005 and \$100 in 2008. The economic boom actually got underway in 1999, with Yeltsin still ensconced, and continued unabated until 2008, by when consumer incomes had more than doubled and Russia's main stock-market index had quintupled. Petrodollars fueled a rapid expansion in public spending on education and public health, with the latter mitigating the nation's demographic crisis (as mortality decreased and fertility increased, Russia was to experience in 2013 its first natural increase – a positive difference between the birth rate and death rate – in decades). Rightly or wrongly, most Russians associated these improvements with the leader.

One paradox of this seeming progress was that, even as the strongman/chief executive was held in high esteem, the regime he embodied little by little grew more intolerant of elite dissent, oppositional activity, and unrehearsed expressions of grassroots discontent. The well-known democracy barometer put out by the American NGO Freedom House captures the trend, albeit with no great precision. In 1992, the Freedom House end-of-year report rated the newly independent Russian polity at 3.5

on a scale from 1 to 7, on which 1 is the most democratic (averaging subratings for political rights and civil liberties) and 7 the most undemocratic. In 1999, Russia scored 4.5, or a notch worse than the halfway point on the scale, and it continued to be reckoned in gross terms as “partly free.” The 2001 *Freedom Report*, stating findings for 2000, Putin’s first year in office, revised the rating for political rights from 4 to 5 and Russia’s composite rating from 4.5 to 5. The bulletin for 2004 recoded Russia from 5 to 6 on political rights, “due to the virtual elimination of influential political opposition parties within the country and the further concentration of executive power.” For the first time since Soviet days, the summary index of 5.5 placed Russia under the “not free,” or undemocratic, heading.

We can say, therefore, that by the onset of Putin’s second term as president, which lasted until May 2008, a Putinesque political system had taken shape, solidified, and been tested in battle. Like many if not all scholars of Russian and Eurasian politics, I would typify that system as a hybrid of autocratic and democratic features, and one in which the autocratic gained steadily on the democratic with the passage of time, to the point that it was debatable whether a threshold of out-and-out authoritarian rule had been crossed. Its operative goals were and remain multiple: state strength; limits on political contestation; economic and social development, in part to enable national competitiveness in the international arena; elite coalition building through co-option, clientelism, and divide-and-rule; and popular legitimacy via managed elections, appeals to nationalism, and welfare spending.⁵

A marker of Putin’s status was the facility with which, abiding by the constitutional limit of two consecutive terms (which he could have overridden but did not), he conveyed his presidential mantle in 2007 –

2008 to Dmitrii Medvedev, a protégé from his hometown of St. Petersburg. Riding Putin’s political coattails, Medvedev hauled in 71 percent of the votes in the 2008 national election, a hair below his mentor in 2004. The transfer set up the so-called tandem of 2008 to 2012, with Putin as prime minister, de jure the second-ranking position, but de facto continuing as paramount leader. Secrecy about these goings-on is such that we still do not know what were the understandings, if any, between the two men at the outset. Medvedev, trained (like Putin) in the law, had no *siloviki* connections, is thirteen years younger, and is a fan of the Internet (which Putin does not use) and of the English rock band Deep Purple. The Moscow insider Gleb Pavlovsky has testified to Putin’s awareness at the time of the dangers of overpersonalization of the system and of handing over power to a clone of himself. “The country needs change,” is how Pavlovsky summarized Putin’s reasoning; “it can’t be ruled by generals.”

Unless future events force a reinterpretation, the tandem years may be relegated to historical footnotes. Medvedev talked a reformist game, though always within the bounds set by the prevailing political arrangements. He waxed lyrical about *modernizatsiya*, dropped in on Silicon Valley and played with electronic gadgetry, made gestures toward human rights and rule of law and averred a “war on corruption,” and worked out a “reset” of the U.S.-Russian relationship with Barack Obama. But he was undermined by a bookish personality, by a penchant for hobby projects (like fiddling with Russia’s time zones), and, most damagingly, by the lack of an opportunity to construct a political machine of his own, distinct from Putin’s. His accession coincided with the Great Recession in the world economy, which hit Russia hard and constrained his ability to innovate. Russian GDP declined by 7.8 percent in 2009 and barely recouped the loss with an anemic

recovery in 2010 – 2011. Medvedev initiatives such as his vaunted war on corruption brought few results, leaving Russia in roughly the same uncomplimentary position as before they started.⁶

Medvedev did not fight to keep his job. In September 2011, he announced at a United Russia convention that in the forthcoming presidential election he would stand aside for Putin, who was now eligible for two more presidential terms. Putin was duly elected (this time with 64 percent of the votes) and the pair switched places in May 2012.

And so Putin has again been at the undisputed helm as the Russian government took weighty and sometimes disruptive decisions these past five years. During the winter of 2011 – 2012, as he and Medvedev acted out their script for swapping positions, street demonstrations erupted in Moscow and a number of other cities against irregularities in counting the votes in the December Duma election, in which United Russia's reported tally slipped below 50 percent. Putin consented to modifications of the electoral rules, among them eased registration requirements for political parties, the return of territorial districts for representation in the Duma (they were abolished after the 2003 election), and a lower threshold for being seated in it. He simultaneously put a quick end to the Medvedev thaw in other respects. New codes levied stiff fines for unsanctioned gatherings and disturbing the peace, broadened the legal definition of high treason, forced all online blogs and social media sites with more than three thousand daily visitors to register as media outlets, and gave government bureaus the right to block politically objectionable online content. Anti-Western and anti-American messages saturated the official media as the Obama-Medvedev reset with the United States went into disuse. Plucking a socially tradition-

alist chord, government bills in 2013 proscribed the "propagandizing of nontraditional sexual relationships" to minors and set down fines and prison sentences for people who "offend the religious feelings of believers." Both met with approval from the Russian Orthodox Church. In 2014, five million employees in security and law enforcement were barred from visiting the United States, and any country that has an extradition treaty with it, without permission from superiors.

In its year-end report for 2014, Freedom House downgraded the Russian score for civil liberties to 6. "Russia's civil liberties rating," says Freedom House, "declined from 5 to 6 due to expanded media controls, a dramatically increased level of propaganda on state-controlled television, and new restrictions on the ability of some citizens to travel abroad." Russia's composite rating was now also 6, its worst score yet, putting it on the same shelf as Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Iran.⁷

On the world stage, Putin's prime choice after reinstatement was to intervene in the imbroglio surrounding the overthrow of the president of next-door Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, in early 2014. It culminated in a nimble Russian military operation in the Ukrainian province of Crimea, a referendum under the aegis of Moscow, and the annexation of the peninsula on March 18. The shocking decision on Crimea was applauded by the bulk of the Russian electorate, deluged by proannexation propaganda. Several months down the road, Russia's army provided protection, supplies, and firepower to an uprising by separatist insurgents in the Donbas area of eastern Ukraine. The imposition of American and European Union sanctions over Russian behavior in Ukraine gave Putin a chance to hold forth against an internal "fifth column" of sympathizers with the West. Turning to a different front, in September 2015, he ordered the air force to be-

gin a bombing campaign in Syria in support of the beleaguered government of Bashar al-Assad.

A paradox of Putinism is that the regime, for all its backsliding, has never transited to unambiguous dictatorship and to complete reliance on blunt repression. Individual liberties have been largely untouched by the authoritarian trend, and the sphere for exercising them is in some regards wider than before 2000 because of the effects of globalization and Russia's affluence in comparison with the Soviet and immediate post-Soviet past. The would-be democratizer of the 1990s, Yeltsin, was allowed a peaceful retirement, and Putin eulogized him in 2007 as "the rare person who is given the destiny to become free himself and at the same time to carry millions along behind him, and to inspire truly historic changes in his homeland."⁸ *Siloviki* hardliners have continued to populate many senior positions, but for whatever reason Putin has been unwilling to turn the whole show over to them. It is also clear that the *siloviki* estate is anything but monolithic and is given to infighting and turf wars. In the past year or two, the president has sent some prominent members of the secret services' old guard into retirement and promoted others. He has also retained the moderate Medvedev in the prime minister's office and found room in high places for "system liberals."⁹ When it occurs, loosening of the reins in one dimension often coincides with a tightening of the reins in another, usually done with some flexibility. A recent case in point would be electoral reform. Gubernatorial elections, for example, were restored, but with "filters" for candidates to keep radical critics of Moscow off the ballot. Also restored were local districts for choosing half of the membership of the Duma. In the Duma election of September 2016, the United Russia juggernaut went all-out to control the district

and was victorious in 203 of the 225 districts; in 2003, United Russia candidates had won in only 102.¹⁰

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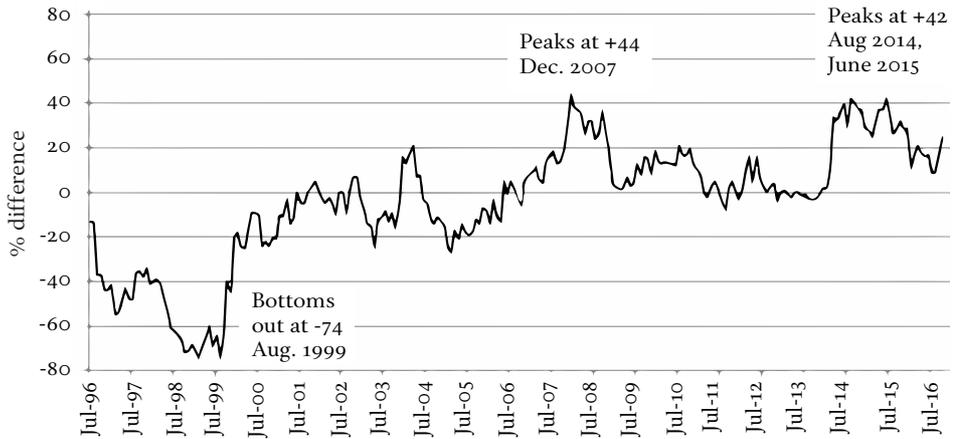
Paradoxes also abound in the outlook of the Russian masses. Putin has perennially basked in ratings that, even if discounted somewhat, would be the envy of politicians almost anywhere. In mid-2015, at the height of the *Krymnash* ("Crimea is Ours") euphoria, 89 percent of Russians aged eighteen and older approved of their president's work. As of October 2016, that figure was still a sky-high 82 percent.¹¹ His popularity has had its ups and downs, to be sure, but going back to his first inauguration in 2000, Putin's confidence scores have never dipped below 60 percent.

Nothing human endures forever. If we are to imagine a Russia beyond Putin, his persona and Teflon qualities as a politician will at some point no longer be determinative. To reason on a wider canvas, it is good practice to bear in mind some other evidence about how Russians think politically. It offers a more nuanced picture than the individuated approval ratings.

Russians, or most Russians, may be enamored of Vladimir Putin, but millions of them have over the years been less than enamored of his government's works and with how the country is doing overall. Figure 1 traces month-by-month data from national Levada Center monitoring surveys of the adult population since the mid-1990s. The survey question is about Russia's general trajectory: is it on the right track or the wrong track?¹² The graph line in Figure 1 shows the difference in percentage points between respondents who gave a positive answer to the question and those who gave a negative answer. The columns in Figure 2 average the monthly numbers by leadership period.

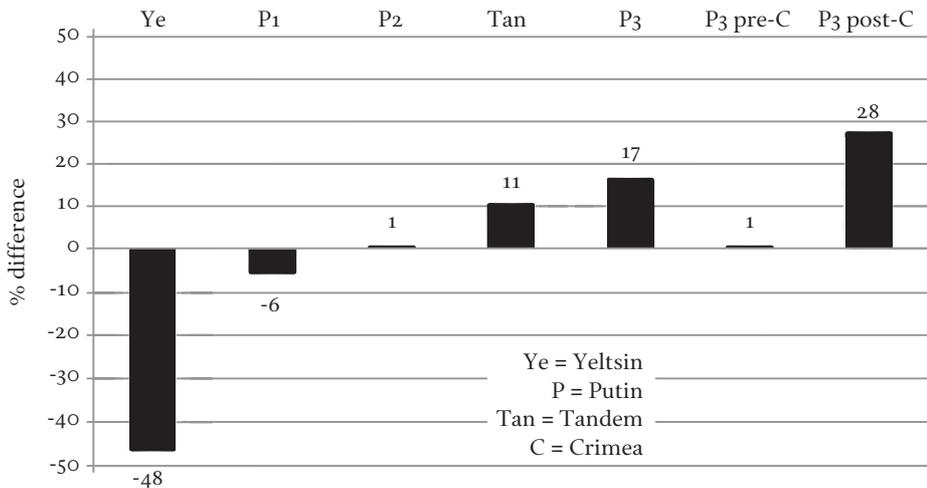
Consistent with the conventional wisdom about the Yeltsin era, up through 2000, the balance was very much in deficit, bottoming out at an abysmal -74 points in Au-

Figure 1
Public Opinion on Russia's Trajectory (% Difference between Those Who Think It is on the Right Track and Those Who Think It is on the Wrong Track), 1996 – 2016



Source: Data from Levada Center, "Assessment of Situation in the Country," <http://www.levada.ru/indikatory/polozhenie-del-v-strane/> (accessed November 28, 2016).

Figure 2
Monthly Averages of Public Opinion on Russia's Trajectory (% Difference) by Leadership Period



Source: Data from Levada Center, "Assessment of Situation in the Country," <http://www.levada.ru/indikatory/polozhenie-del-v-strane/> (accessed November 28, 2016).

gust 1999 (8 percent of Russians that summer believed Russia was on the right track and 82 percent believed that it was on the wrong track). The mean monthly balance in assessments between 1996 and the end of 1999 was -48 percentage points. On Putin's watch, the optimists began to gain on the pessimists, until in October 2001, Levada for the first time registered a positive balance to the tune of +2 points.¹³ It may surprise some readers to learn that, despite the uptick, citizen judgments remained in negative territory throughout Putin's first term, from 2000 to 2004 (a mean of -6 points). They were perceptibly better during his second term, 2004 to 2008, especially between mid-2005 and the end of 2007, when the plan to bring in Medvedev as president had been set in motion. Net assessment hit an all-time high of +44 percentage points in December 2007, although for Putin's second term altogether it barely crept into positive territory (+1 point average over the four years).

It is striking that soundings of the nation's condition were more flattering under the much-maligned Medvedev-Putin tandem of 2008 to 2012 (+11 points on average) than during either of Putin's first two terms. In other words, Russians thought better of their leadership when Putin was the nominal second-in-command and someone else was president than when Putin reigned solo before May 2008. And they did so at a time of economic setbacks that left the standard of living stagnant from 2009 through 2011.

Putin's third term, true, has provided better reviews (+17 points on average as of October 2016). The gain, however, is entirely the product of a post-Crimea bounce. Net assessments were +1 percentage point until February 2014, the same meager figure as in Putin's second term, when they thenceforth rose abruptly from March of 2014 to a mean of +28 points. In August 2014 and June 2015, the gap was +42 percentage points; very high, though 2 points less than

the crest of December 2007. Since mid-2015 (look again at Figure 1) there has been a noticeable tendency for less ebullient public evaluations.

Also of interest are Levada Center results for Prime Minister Medvedev, whose career has been intimately bound up with Putin and who is in charge of day-to-day management of government ministries and bureaucracy. Seventy-one percent of Russian citizens approved of his work in the Council of Ministers in September 2014, with 27 percent disapproving. Negative assessments of Medvedev have exceeded the positive since August 2016. As of this writing, the balance was 48 percent approval and 51 percent disapproval. The same downward drift applies to regional governors: from 66 percent approval and 32 percent disapproval in September 2014 to 46 percent approval and 53 percent disapproval in October 2016.

It is impossible to say how long the good feelings generated by the incorporation of Crimea will linger. Contrary to expectations in Washington and Brussels, they are for now being reinforced and prolonged by resentment of the sanctions and other policies seen as unjustly anti-Russian. In a Levada Center survey in August 2016, almost 60 percent of respondents professed unconcern at the impact of Western economic penalties and 70 percent favored an unyielding Russian policy in the face of them.

Common sense and precedent suggest, though, that it is only a matter of time before this mood dissipates. When it does, there is reason to suppose that, barring changes in the equation, Russians will revert to the lukewarm assessments of the national condition that characterized Putin's rule prior to the spring of 2014.

This does not necessarily mean a shift toward a revolutionary frame of mind: receptivity to the "shakeups, cataclysms, and total makeovers" Putin bemoaned in his "Millennium Manifesto." A corrective to that notion would be the experience of the

1990s, when most Russians reckoned the nation's plight as dire but did not rise up in rebellion against the status quo. What reversion to the mean implies would be the presence in the not so distant future of tens of millions of Russians, a large minority or even a majority of the population, who are convinced that their country, under current management, is headed in the wrong direction. Such sentiment, it goes without saying, can in principle be mobilized by political agents for more than one purpose.

Before delving into particulars, readers should bear in mind several contextual variables that are sure to confront Putin and his confederates, and in due course their heirs, in the years to come.

One challenge is the condition of Russian society itself. Russia in 2017 is a richer, a more complex, and a more interconnected place – in short, a more modern place – than it was a generation ago under the Soviet Politburo. In 2013, the World Bank, applying a floor of \$12,616 in nominal GDP per capita, reclassified Putin's Russia as a high-income country, better off than three-quarters of the bank's member nations. Russia by now has all of the accoutrements of mature consumerism. Russians' pocketbooks today hold 150 million plastic cards, 30 million of them revolving credit cards, and they withdraw cash and pay bills at more ATMs per capita than any country other than Canada or San Marino. One-quarter of residential property acquisitions in Russia are completed through mortgages. Sales of new motor vehicles went through the roof after 1999, from 903,000 that year to 1,807,000 in 2005 and 3,142,000 in 2012, bringing with them atrocious traffic congestion. Forty-eight million Russians took vacations abroad in 2012, quadruple the number who did in 1999, and they went to more exotic destinations. Red tape and officious inspections notwithstanding, in 2015, Russia had 227,000 registered

NGOs.¹⁴ In 1999, there was 1 cellphone in use per 100 Russian citizens; in 2004, there were 51 cellphones in use per 100 Russians, in 2008 there were 139, and in 2012 there were 145. Only 1 Russian in 100 had regular access to the Internet in 1999. Thirteen did in 2004, 27 in 2008, and 64 in 2012. Fast-moving, nonhierarchical, and transnational, the Internet is an unrivaled agent of sociocultural globalization, a pervasive process about which Putin is deeply suspicious. Eighty percent of Russians with Internet access use social networks, which is 30 points more than the European Union mean.

Theories that posit a linear link between social and economic development as cause and political change as effect do not get us very far in the short term, since socioeconomic and political forces in Russia, contrary to prediction, moved in opposite directions after 1999: more development, less democracy.¹⁵ It is a fact, nonetheless, that developed societies are, statistically speaking, much more apt to possess democratic institutions than undeveloped or developing societies. Which brings us up against the most vexing paradox of them all. When the World Bank resituated Putin's Russia in its high-income category in 2013, 82 percent of countries in that bracket were democratically governed (free in Freedom House terms), while 46 percent of upper-middle-income countries, 30 percent of lower-middle-income countries, and only 8 percent of low-income countries were democratically governed. Russia is one of just eight nondemocratic outliers in the high-income group. All of the others are petrostates, hooked on oil and gas revenues that amplify the state's coercive capacity and autonomy from society. And six of the seven are hereditary monarchies; the seventh is Equatorial Guinea, the former Spanish colony in West Africa that Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo has governed since taking over in a coup in 1979. With large manufacturing and ser-

vice sectors, Russia has an incomparably more diverse economy than the other nations in this category; fossil fuels account for 16 percent of Russian GDP, but account for 40 percent of Saudi Arabia's and 83 percent of Equatorial Guinea's GDP.

Russia, in short, bucks a global trend, and it is an open question how long it can continue to do so, under Putin and beyond Putin. Either the received theoretical framings of the trend are wrong; there is something about Russia that exempts it from the trend; or there is a lag, after which Russia will conform to theory.

Most urgent in the here and now, and further blurring the picture, is the grinding to a halt of the economic advances of Putin's glory years. While the core gains of the boom are not lost, some are in jeopardy, and uncertainty once more clouds the horizon. Ukraine-related sanctions are merely a piece of the problem. Well before the "Euromaidan" in Kiev, Russia's economy was in a slump, with growth dropping from 4 percent in 2010 to 0.6 percent in 2014. The data, in short, were already testifying to an outdated economic model – a conceptual cul-de-sac of the regime's own making –

and to recalcitrant structural problems. Unlike the downturn of 2009, this one was not a local symptom of global trends, and it was not limited to one bad year. Then came the body blow of the collapse of world petroleum prices in the third and fourth quarters of 2014 and in 2015, slashing oil and gas revenues to a fraction of their peak levels. The economy was in recession in 2015 and 2016, with GDP down 5 to 6 percent, and the exchange value of the ruble has been halved. Policy-makers are squeezed on all sides, not least by commitments they made in the salad days – to indexed pensions, say, to infrastructural investment, or to rearmament. Will this perfect storm result in a push for a new model or to a hunkering down on the old? Will disagreements over economic stagnation and how to remedy it, which are legion in Russia in 2017, spill over into a power struggle, and what difference will they make for the agenda of political and institutional change?

These are some of the issues, some of the intellectual puzzles, and some of the contradictions lying in the background of the more specialized themes explored on the pages that follow.

ENDNOTES

¹ Translated from the original Russian by the author.

² Ibid.

³ *Governors* is used here in the generic sense, referring to the regional chief executives whose official titles have varied from place to place and year to year.

⁴ Khodorkovsky surely committed some of the offenses of which he was accused, but the trial was an obvious case of selective prosecution.

⁵ A medley of goals like these are addressed in the recent and extensive literature on comparative authoritarianism. See, for example, Jorge Castañeda, *Perpetuating Power: How Mexican Presidents Were Chosen* (New York: New Press, 2000); Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, "Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats," *Comparative Political Studies* 40 (11) (November 2007): 1279 – 1301; Beatriz Magaloni, "Credible Power-Sharing and the Longevity of Authoritarian Rule," *Comparative Political Studies* 41 (4/5) (April 2008): 715 – 741; Dan Slater, *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Dan Slater and Sofia Fenner, "State Power and Staying Power: Infrastructural Mechanisms and Authoritarian Durability," *Journal of International Affairs* 65 (1) (2011): 15 – 29; and Milan Svoblik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

- ⁶ By way of illustration, the control-of-corruption statistic in the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators puts Russia in the eighty-third percentile of the countries surveyed in 2013, indistinguishable from the eighty-fourth percentile where it sat in 1996. For a concise overview of these and related indices, see Timothy J. Colton, *Russia: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 210–215.
- ⁷ Such contemporary comparisons have their uses, and hence I cite them here and in other works, but in historical perspective, the exact Freedom House ratings toward the authoritarian extreme of the scale are absurdly compressed. The idea that Putin's Russia is six-sevenths as unfree as Stalin's Soviet Union or Hitler's Germany cannot be taken seriously.
- ⁸ Quoted in Timothy J. Colton, *Yeltsin: A Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 447. Putin made similar remarks at the official opening of Yeltsin's presidential library and museum in 2015. The government-financed complex is located in the Urals city of Yekaterinburg, where Yeltsin made his career in the Communist Party apparatus.
- ⁹ Among the important *siloviki* to depart have been Sergei Ivanov (most recently chief of the presidential staff), Viktor Ivanov (who once headed the Kremlin personnel department), Mikhail Fradkov (former prime minister and chief of foreign intelligence), and Vladimir Yakunin (longtime head of the national railways). On the liberal side of the house, Sergei Kiriyenko (who was briefly prime minister under Yeltsin) has been given responsibility in the Kremlin apparatus for managing domestic politics, while Aleksei Kudrin, the former finance minister, chairs a commission preparing recommendations for economic reform.
- ¹⁰ The 2016 election also had fourteen political parties on the national party-list ballot, up from seven in 2011. United Russia increased its vote share here by 5 percentage points to 54 percent. The ruling party did much better in some regions than in others, with its officially reported share running the gamut from 35 percent to 96 percent. None of the newly registered parties took more than 2 percent of the popular vote country-wide.
- ¹¹ The Levada Center is registered as a nonprofit organization rather than a commercial firm. It regularly does polls on contract for non-Russian clients. In October 2016, the Ministry of Justice branded it a "foreign agent," presumably out of unhappiness with its political independence and openness to international transactions. It should be noted that the findings generated by government-friendly agencies (such as VTsIOM and FOM) diverge very little from those of the Levada group.
- ¹² Details taken from Levada Center, "Assessment of Situation in the Country," <http://www.levada.ru/indikatory/polozhenie-del-v-strane/> (accessed November 28, 2016). Variations on this question have been asked in countless polls in Western countries.
- ¹³ As with many Putin-era changes, this one was anticipated in the latter part of the Yeltsin period. The net score went up from -74 points in August 1999 to -20 points in December 1999, the month Yeltsin took early retirement.
- ¹⁴ Russian civil society organizations are legally defined as nonprofit organizations (the acronym is NKO) rather than nongovernmental organizations. An unknown number of registered NKOs are hollow shells or government-created fakes. The flip side of the coin is that there are thousands of other organizations that are not registered at all.
- ¹⁵ The archetypal statement of the development-begets-democracy thesis is Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review* 53 (1) (1959): 69–105.