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# RUSSIA'S ROAD TO AUTOCRACY

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Three decades ago, on 19 August 1991, defenders of democracy surrounded the Russian parliament and other buildings in Moscow and St. Petersburg to stop a coup. By August 21, tens of thousands of unarmed Russian civilians had thwarted an attempted usurpation of power orchestrated by senior Soviet government officials. For any supporter of democracy inside or outside of Russia that week, the victory of Russian democrats over Soviet autocrats was truly a euphoric moment. On 2 September 1991, *Time's* cover trumpeted, "The Russian Revolution: Serfdom's End. A thousand years of autocracy are reversed." In December, the Soviet Union collapsed, its fifteen republics became independent countries, and Russia became a democracy for the first time since 1917—or maybe for the first time ever.

Thirty years later, scholars argue over the degree of dictatorship that has taken hold, but no one classifies Russia as a democracy today.<sup>1</sup> In the third and fourth waves of democratization,<sup>2</sup> Russia's democratic collapse must rank as one of the most consequential setbacks. What happened?

Echoing a broader theoretical debate about the role of structures and leaders in understanding regime types, explanations of modern Russian autocracy cover the full spectrum. Some analysts argue that structural factors such as Russian history, culture, and geography have pushed governments in Moscow and St. Petersburg toward dictatorship for centuries; 1991 was an aberration, and the early 2000s marked a return to Russia's historical equilibrium. Some even contend that there was no democratic breakthrough in the 1990s, only state collapse. That most

countries which emerged from the Soviet wreckage are autocracies today further buoys cultural, patrimonial, historical, and institutional accounts. Other actor-centric theorists, however, reason that the Soviet Union and now Russia have been cursed by a series of bad leaders, from Mikhail Gorbachev to Boris Yeltsin and now Vladimir Putin. Some also fault Russia's democratic opposition leaders as inept and divided.

My explanation for Russian autocracy charts a third path between structure and agency, but leans toward agency. Russian political leaders and social movements made choices that first pushed toward democracy and later toward autocracy. Individuals and choices matter, even if they sometimes generate unintended consequences. At the same time, these actors did not make choices in a vacuum; they were shaped and constrained by innate structural forces, as well as more proximate decisions, especially about institutional design, that limited the parameters of the possible for subsequent decisions—that is, path dependence. Both structure and agency must be factored into the analysis to develop a comprehensive explanation for Russia's transition from autocracy and back again.

### **Transition from Totalitarian Rule to Democracy**

Before dissolving in 1991, the USSR under the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) had been the longest-lasting one-party state in the world (a distinction now held by China). In the early years of Bolshevik rule, analysts speculated about many factors that seemed ripe to undermine the nascent regime. How could a single system of government control all property, set all prices, and simultaneously monitor all residents of a multiethnic empire in the largest country in the world? Over time, however, Soviet totalitarian communism took root, and attention shifted to explaining its stability. Especially after World War II, most scholars stopped speculating about regime change and instead focused on understanding the conditions underlying the system's endurance, including the CPSU's uniquely draconian instruments of repression; popular perceptions of the state's effectiveness and legitimacy; and even whether the Soviet system was more representative of social interests and therefore more stable than capitalist democracies. Comparative research found the one-party system to be more durable than other forms of autocracy, and some international-relations theories attributed this stability to the bipolar system of the Cold War era.<sup>3</sup> Explaining equilibrium, not change, dominated Sovietology.

A few scholars, however, did highlight signs of regime decay, and some saw the same forces of modernization observed in other countries also sprouting in the USSR. For all its evils as a ruthless, totalitarian dictatorship, the Soviet regime did engineer the transformation of an agrarian society into an industrial one, complete with social, demographic,

and economic changes commonly associated with modernization. This socioeconomic transformation began to stall in the 1970s and 1980s, in part because CPSU general secretary Leonid Brezhnev focused too

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much on external expansion and neglected domestic reform (this period is often called *zastoi* or stagnation). Furthermore, the coercive instruments of the command economy that succeeded in forcing peasants to become workers were less effective at transforming workers (or their children) into computer scientists, service providers, or postindustrial innovators. When social and economic modernization outpaces political and institutional change, revolutions sometimes occur.<sup>4</sup> Yet despite these pressures on Soviet political institutions,

the system remained stable in 1985—the year Mikhail Gorbachev became general secretary. Tragically, poorly performing dictatorships can survive for a long time, especially if they can finance themselves with oil, gas, and mineral exports.

It was Gorbachev, not weakening state institutions or a failing command economy, who triggered regime change in the Soviet Union. Gorbachev was not compelled to select the policy reforms that he did. Other paths were available, as Chinese Communist Party leaders have proven. Gorbachev's economic and political reforms, as well as their timing, unleashed forces out of his control that eventually combined to produce nascent democracy, economic disarray, and state collapse.

The Soviet leader and his advisors properly diagnosed the country's economic malaise, which was born of decades of neglect. Gorbachev's initial impulse for jumpstarting growth was very Soviet—make people work harder and faster. One of his first policies was even called *uskoreniye* or acceleration; another was an anti-alcohol campaign intended to increase productivity. When these incremental reforms failed to produce significant results, Gorbachev lunged toward a more ambitious, albeit ill-defined, concept he labeled *perestroika* (rebuilding). Among the limited market reforms that followed were new laws on cooperatives, which allowed for some privately owned small businesses, and another meant to enforce hard budget constraints on enterprise activities.

Gorbachev was both ambitious and impatient. He first purged the CPSU—in the biggest expulsion since Stalin—to try to transform the Party into a body more supportive of his agenda. When that failed, he tried to empower the soviets—councils or parliaments at the union, republic, oblast (regional), city, and neighborhood levels—to spearhead reforms. He called for elections to the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies in late March of 1989, followed by more elections at all lower

levels a year later. In March 1990, Gorbachev created the office of Soviet president, which he then occupied, to complement his role as CPSU general secretary. The traditional party-state fusion found in communist regimes was now splitting. In parallel, Gorbachev allowed for *glasnost* (openness) in the press and no longer actively repressed civil society organizations, which proliferated amid the excitement of competitive elections.

After the 1989 balloting for the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies, this entity morphed from a rubberstamp for Party decisions into a more deliberative body. This was largely because anticommunist forces, which included nationalists from non-Russian republics and anti-Soviet leaders from the Russian Republic, had won seats. Among the latter was Boris Yeltsin, a marginalized former Politburo member and secretary of the Moscow City Committee. Yeltsin revived his flagging political career by winning a parliamentary seat in a rout of his conservative opponents. By this time, support for Gorbachev's reforms was already waning; some thought he had gone too far; others believed he was not moving fast enough. At the same time, the cocktail of increased media freedom, civil society mobilization, and competitive elections gave rise to new currents of ethnic identity and decolonization politics in many non-Russian republics.

The context for the 1990 elections was therefore radically different from just a year earlier in ways that CPSU leaders did not anticipate.<sup>5</sup> In the Baltic republics, Georgia, and Ukraine, anti-Soviet, nationalist movements won solid majorities, which they then used to press for greater autonomy from Moscow. And they had allies in the metropole, as a loose coalition known as Democratic Russia won enough seats in the Russian Congress of People's Deputies to narrowly elect Yeltsin as chairman. On 12 June 1990, this legislature voted for Russian sovereignty from the Soviet Union, launching a power struggle between the Soviet government, the Russian government, and governments in a handful of other republics that ended only after the August 1991 failed coup.

Gorbachev's decision to hold elections for the soviets in 1989 and 1990 unwittingly empowered his political opponents, especially those pursuing independence. The limited success of economic reforms further fueled opposition from all sides of the political spectrum. But ultimately, it was his conservative critics, not his democratic detractors, who moved against him most directly, placing Gorbachev under house arrest and declaring emergency rule in August 1991 in hopes of preserving the Soviet Union. Instead, their failed attempt accelerated the exact opposite outcome.

Maybe the socioeconomic and ethnic forces suppressed by the Soviet one-party system would have eventually undermined this regime with or without Gorbachev. In the long run, autocracies governing modernizing societies tend to crumble. Imagine, however, if a more conserva-

tive general secretary had come to power in 1985, or if Gorbachev had implemented gradual reforms that the Party supported or had not empowered new politicians by convoking elections. Or imagine if the head coup-plotter in 1991 had been someone like Putin, with little hesitation to use force against fellow citizens. Russia's democratic transition could have unfolded very differently or might never have begun at all.

### **Failure of Democratic Consolidation**

After crushing Nikolai Ryzhkov, the last chairman of the Soviet Council of Ministers and four other candidates, with 58.6 percent of the popular vote in the first round of the June 1991 presidential election, Yeltsin became Russia's first elected head of state. This was Yeltsin's third landslide victory in a competitive, free, and fair election in three years. Likewise, his allies in the Russian Congress had also won office in free and fair contests in 1990. By January 1992, therefore, Yeltsin and his advisors believed that they had a mandate to govern and focused on initiating major market reforms that Gorbachev had either refused or failed to implement—liberalization, macroeconomic stabilization, and privatization.

By December 1991, when Yeltsin met with the leaders of Ukraine and Belarus to dissolve the USSR, the Soviet economy had been in freefall for years, with massive inflation, shortages that required ration cards, huge deficits, and dwindling reserves. The Soviet collapse triggered new challenges on top of these lingering problems. All postcommunist countries endured economic contraction while transitioning from command to market systems, but Russia's starting point was considerably worse than most others. The situation was so dire that some even proposed a transitional dictatorship to shepherd the country through the inevitable economic depression, followed by democratic restoration once the economy started to grow.

Adding to the economic challenges, ethnic mobilization exploded in some autonomous republics within Russia, especially Chechnya and Tatarstan. Holding the Russian Federation together haunted Yeltsin throughout his decade in office. Soviet collapse also had left tens of millions of ethnic Russians living abroad overnight, fueling nationalist movements and dynamics familiar to scholars of Weimar Germany. Moreover, Yeltsin and his team did not benefit from the institutional legacies, traditions, or external factors that supported democratic transitions in other countries, such as previous experience with democracy, ethnic homogeneity, agreement on the demarcation of state borders, or the promise of European Union membership. It is hard to imagine a more challenging starting point than what Yeltsin faced as he simultaneously tackled the triple transformation of empire to nation-state, dictatorship to democracy, and command economy to capitalism. Even the

most brilliant reformer, which Yeltsin most certainly was not, would have struggled to succeed under these structurally determined circumstances.

In 1992, Yeltsin tried to sequence change: economic reforms first, then political reforms. He hired a young team of market-oriented economists led by Yegor Gaidar to spearhead what regrettably became labeled “shock therapy,” a strategy of doing everything rapidly and simultaneously to accelerate change and lessen the duration of economic contraction. It worked in Poland and, to a lesser extent, in other postcommunist countries. We will never know if it could have succeeded in Russia, because it was never really tried. Only weeks after price liberalization, resistance began to fester within the Russian Congress in response to inflation. Opposition strengthened when Gaidar’s team tried to cut subsidies and close the budget deficit. Their privatization plan was diluted by an amendment that gave insiders—former Soviet directors—de facto control of enterprises, contrary to the original aim, which had been to stimulate majority nonstate, outside ownership through vouchers.

To placate conservative critics of his economic reforms, Yeltsin replaced Gaidar with Viktor Chernomyrdin, a Soviet-era *apparatchik* and the former head of Gazprom, the state-owned gas monopoly. But Chernomyrdin’s partial reforms worsened the economy and fueled polarization between the “democrats” and “communists.” To end this stalemate, Yeltsin’s critics sought to adopt a new constitution that would have radically weakened presidential power. But before it could vote, Yeltsin dissolved the Russian Congress by presidential decree in September 1993. This decision triggered another standoff around the parliament, a replay of August 1991—only this time Yeltsin sat in the Kremlin. On October 3, defenders of the Congress seized the mayor’s office and the national television station. Yeltsin struck back, authorizing Russian tanks to attack and special forces to storm the parliament building. Nearly 150 people were killed and hundreds more injured. Russia’s first post-Soviet experiment with democratic rule ended in flames. Some argue that it never recovered.

In the aftermath of the crisis, Yeltsin did not implement a prolonged state of emergency or rule by decree. Instead, he called for parliamentary elections just two months later, in December 1993, and put forward a new constitution to be ratified by referendum. The proposed charter strengthened the powers of the presidency so significantly that some labeled the new system “superpresidential.” The referendum passed. In parliamentary elections, assessed to be relatively free and fair, the communists and their agrarian comrades did well, but the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) was the big winner, capturing nearly a quarter of the party-list vote. The balance of power between liberal reformers and their critics in the new parliament, now called the Duma, became relatively equal.

In 1996, Yeltsin defeated the communist candidate, Gennady Zyuganov,

in the second round of a close presidential vote that was marred by credible claims of minor fraud. Although Yeltsin's campaign resources—including national television networks, oligarchic money, and regional-government loyalties—dwarfed those of his opponent, uncertainty about who would win lingered up to election day, which is an essential element of a minimalist definition of electoral democracy.

Yeltsin won a second term, but his health was failing fast. The following year, the search for a successor was in full swing. When Yeltsin announced the appointment of a new reformist government, he elevated to first deputy prime minister his heir-apparent, Nizhny Novgorod governor Boris Nemtsov. Everyone understood Nemtsov's move to the federal government as his next step toward a presidential bid in 2000. Yeltsin said as much at the time.

But economics intervened again. A global financial meltdown felled Russia's fragile economy in August 1998, forcing the government to renege on debts, devalue the ruble, and plead for International Monetary Fund (IMF) help. International structural factors had a negative, causal impact on Russia's democracy. The regime may have been superpresidential, but Yeltsin lacked sufficient power to insulate his reformist government from an enraged parliament demanding change. To placate the communists and their parliamentary allies, Yeltsin nominated former foreign minister Yevgeny Primakov as prime minister, effectively ending Nemtsov's prospects for succeeding Yeltsin.

Ironically, Primakov was compelled to keep many pro-market policies and work with the IMF; he had little choice since his government was broke. But in 1998, Yeltsin's inner circle, which was sometimes called "the family," feared a communist restoration if Primakov were to be elected president in 2000. So, they devised a new succession plan and convinced Yeltsin to appoint Vladimir Putin as prime minister and to create a new political party, Unity, to compete in parliamentary elections in December 1999. If Unity performed better than Primakov's Fatherland party in that election, Putin would gain momentum for the 2000 presidential contest.<sup>6</sup> In the end, Unity narrowly defeated Fatherland in 1999, in a contest considered by most analysts to have been Russia's most competitive, free, and fair election (if also nasty and negative). After Primakov's party lost, he was persuaded not to run for president in 2000.

On 31 December 1999, the ailing Yeltsin resigned and named Putin acting president, triggering the election to be moved forward to March 2000, which benefited the acting president's electoral prospects. Putin's presidential bid also benefited from the second Chechen war, launched in mid-1999, which was very popular after Chechen terrorists allegedly attacked several civilian targets that September.<sup>7</sup> With all these conditions in his favor, Putin won the 2000 election easily. At that moment, Russia's fragile political system still met the minimal definition of an electoral democracy.



As already described, Yeltsin, his government, and his supporters had a formidable negative inheritance—that is, structural factors beyond their control. In the first third-wave transitions, democrats had to navigate the precarious path from autocracy to democracy, but they did not have to simultaneously tackle economic transformation. In Eastern Europe, democrats pursued democratic and market reforms together. But in Russia, democrats had to address imperial dissolution as well. No matter their decisions, the process of transition from authoritarian rule in Russia in 1991 would have been challenging.

Some choices produced enduring positive consequences. The collapse of empire was managed relatively peacefully. Although imperfect market reforms were more painful than they needed to be, and the enormous costs of Russia's transition still haunt its economy, Russians today are richer than at any other time in their history. Yeltsin's market reforms—many continued by Putin initially—provided the necessary conditions for the current prosperity. Although Yeltsin failed to deepen or consolidate democracy, by the end of his tenure, free, fair, and competitive elections for the parliament and the presidency were taking place, a free press existed, multiple political parties had formed, civil society had sprouted, and a degree of federalism endured.

At the same time, Yeltsin made decisions that undermined democratic consolidation and to some extent paved the way for future autocratic restoration. Dissolving the Russian Congress by decree was a mistake that compelled him weeks later to use force against elected representatives. It also produced a superpresidential constitution that Putin has deployed effectively to roll back democracy. Had Russia become a parliamentary democracy in 1993, either by not dissolving the Russian Congress or by ratifying a new constitution, democracy might have survived after Yeltsin. Had Yeltsin called for new elections after the attempted coup in 1991, at the height of his popularity and national support for democracy, he and his government might have enjoyed greater support when implementing painful reforms.

Yeltsin's second critical mistake was the so-called loans-for-shares program. To muster resources for reelection in 1996, Yeltsin and his government took financial support—"loans"—from Russia's richest oligarchs in return for shares in lucrative companies. Some on Yeltsin's team considered this strategy a hedge against communist victory; if Zyuganov won, he would not be able to control these already privatized firms. The scheme was not needed; the oligarchs had every incentive to finance Yeltsin's campaign because they feared communist restoration. By making them richer through this insider scheme, Yeltsin tarnished the legitimacy of privatization, discredited his entire market-reform agenda, and undermined support for democracy more generally, since many Russians saw the new system of government as synonymous with corruption.

A third error was Yeltsin's failure to dissolve the KGB. Although it was split into external- and internal-intelligence branches, more substantial reforms were never adopted. By keeping this central organ of Soviet-era repression essentially intact, Yeltsin handed Putin, himself former KGB officer, a powerful tool for restoring dictatorship after 2000.

Finally, Yeltsin's most consequential choice was naming Putin as his successor. At the time, Putin was a complete unknown; there was no groundswell of popular support for his political or economic ideas, nor his method of rule. In August 1999, opinion polls showed that only a tiny fraction of Russian citizens had heard of him. Yeltsin had other options, but he picked Putin or at least acceded to the choice—by many accounts, Yeltsin was by then not physically or mentally capable of making decisions—because Yeltsin's inner circle thought that Putin could win and would not disrupt the status quo. After all, Putin had worked closely with many of the St. Petersburg economic reformers now working for Yeltsin. The oligarchs closest to Yeltsin at the time believed—wrongly as we now know—that Putin would not seek to redistribute their properties. But the decision to pick Putin was not only bad for some oligarchic fortunes, but profoundly negative for Russian democracy.

### **Autocratic Restoration**

In 1999, Yeltsin might have been excused for not recognizing the political impact of selecting Putin as his successor. After the Soviet Union's collapse, many former KGB officers abandoned their commitment to defend the USSR and used their unique access to information to enrich themselves in Russia's new capitalist economy. After returning from his last posting abroad, Putin seemed to be on that same path. He worked for St. Petersburg mayor Anatoly Sobchak, a liberal reformer, in a purportedly lucrative position responsible for foreign business contacts. Like everyone else scrambling to find a place in the new order, Putin was a typical opportunist. When Sobchak lost re-election in 1996, Putin needed a new job. Instead of joining the communists or the LDPR, he secured a midlevel administrative position in Yeltsin's Kremlin. Through a series of lucky turns, he rose within the internal ranks to become prime minister in 1999 and acting president in 2000. During this time, he never expressed views that deviated from Yeltsin's.

In fact, in the first years of his presidency, Putin pushed through some major market reforms, including a 13 percent flat income tax and a reduced cooperative tax, and appointed several ministers with liberal market credentials. On foreign policy, he initially maintained a Western orientation, especially after 9/11, as the global war on terrorism created common cause with the United States.

Putin did, however, immediately reign in autonomous political insti-

tutions, organizations, and individuals that could constrain presidential power. He first seized control over national television networks, understanding that these assets played an essential role in delivering electoral success in the 1999 parliamentary elections and his presidential election in 2000. Ironically, Boris Berezovsky, an oligarch who vigorously supported Yeltsin's choice of Putin, fled after Putin's election and surrendered control of the country's largest television network, ORT, to the Kremlin. Businessman Vladimir Gusinsky also emigrated, eventually losing his television company NTV and other assets. Putin moved to further weaken oligarchic power with the arrest in 2003 of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Russia's richest person at the time, who was funding political parties and individuals disloyal to the Kremlin. By the time Putin was reelected in March 2004, his power was significantly more concentrated than it had been four years prior.

In these early years, Russian democracy eroded significantly. Most scholars considered the political system a dictatorship, albeit with softening adjectives such as "electoral," "competitive," "unconsolidated," or "hybrid." But Putin in the 2000s did not completely crush all political opposition or debilitate every democratic institution.<sup>8</sup> Instead, he created a system his advisors described as "managed democracy" and later as "sovereign democracy." This regime tolerated pockets of pluralism, because Putin was popular enough to win elections. The sources of his popularity, however, were not entirely or even mostly of his making: The painful partial market reforms of the 1990s had finally started to stimulate growth, which was sustained for several years by soaring global oil and gas prices, a factor over which Putin had no influence. Structural economic factors, especially global energy prices, propelled Putin's popularity. They would have done the same for Nemtsov's popularity, or any other Russian leader in the right place at the right time in 2000. To consolidate, new democracies need to deliver, especially on economic outcomes. The same is true of fledgling autocracies.

From Yeltsin's choices, Putin also inherited a strong presidential constitution and unreformed intelligence services, assets that facilitated his rollback of democracy. Individuals matter in the making and breaking of democracies, but so do socioeconomic factors and historical institutional path dependency. Had the Russian economy continued another decade of depression in the 2000s, Putin's autocracy likely would not have lasted. Conversely, had Yeltsin chosen Nemtsov, democracy probably would have strengthened as the economy grew.

By 2008, Putin felt so in control that he stepped down as president, allowed his loyal aide, Dmitri Medvedev, to assume that office, and took over as prime minister himself. Regarding democracy, little improved in the Medvedev years (2008–12). But conditions did not become worse. The new Russian president said all the right things about the need for political modernization and implemented modest reforms. When mas-

sive demonstrations erupted to protest the rigging of the December 2011 parliamentary elections, Medvedev's impulse was to engage the opposition, not arrest them.<sup>9</sup>

Similar to 1998, international events again affected Russian domestic politics and Putin's political calculus during the Medvedev era. The 2008 global financial crisis ended years of economic growth and weakened support for the government. Three years later in 2011, the Arab Spring exploded in the Middle East, toppling some dictators, challenging others, and requiring the international community to respond. Amazingly, Medvedev shared the West's analytic framework and agreed to abstain on UN Security Council resolutions authorizing the use of force against Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qadhafi's regime. Putin publicly disagreed, believing that the United States was orchestrating these revolutions, just as he believed it had in Serbia in 2000, Georgia in 2003, and Ukraine in 2004. Maybe Putin had always planned to return as president, but many Kremlin experts believe that Medvedev's decision to side with U.S. president Barack Obama on Libya was the final straw, demonstrating his mentee's inability or weakness to thwart the U.S. threat. A few months later, Putin launched his re-election campaign.

Between announcing his bid for a third presidential term in September 2011 and winning in March 2012, Putin witnessed the largest popular mobilization against his regime ever. In fact, they were the country's biggest demonstrations since the Soviet collapse in 1991. Outraged by overwhelming evidence of fraud in the December 2011 parliamentary elections, the crowds quickly escalated their demands. "Russia without Putin" became a popular refrain. Individuals mattered greatly during this period; charismatic, prodemocracy leaders played a critical role in mobilizing resistance, from protest veterans such as Boris Nemtsov to new figures such as anticorruption crusader Alexei Navalny (now in prison). At the time, Nemtsov and his colleagues, especially Navalny, conducted sophisticated investigations to expose massive corruption schemes orchestrated by Putin and his cronies. Nemtsov continued to uncover corruption until his assassination in 2014. Even from prison today, Navalny continues to do so, writing in August 2021, "Putin's oligarchs, those heading 'state-owned' companies and companies that are formally private but whose prosperity is linked to Putin's group, are not businessmen but leaders of organised crime groups."<sup>10</sup>

In addition to corruption and electoral fraud, newly emerging socioeconomic forces helped fuel massive demonstrations in 2011–12. Decades earlier, Barrington Moore wrote, "A vigorous and independent class of town dwellers has been an indispensable element in the growth of parliamentary democracy. No bourgeois, no democracy."<sup>11</sup> Demonstrators did not call themselves the "bourgeois," but something similar—the "creative class." Desiring more than prosperity, these urban, propertied, and educated citizens wanted to vote in free and fair elections. Many had

become well-off as a result of sustained economic growth, but were now turning against Putin. Some former ministers and Kremlin-tied oligarchs even joined the demonstrations.

While Medvedev was engaging the opposition, Putin continued to campaign by framing the divide in Russian society as between conservative patriots and Western-funded traitors. This message resonated less than different slogans had in earlier campaigns, but it was enough to win, in part because Putin faced no serious opposition on the ballot.

After his inauguration, Putin ended negotiations with his opponents. New legislation was passed to crack down on civil society, increase control on Russians with dual citizenship, and label nongovernmental organizations receiving international donations as “foreign agents.” Most Western foundations and organizations, including the U.S. Agency for International Development, were forced to leave the country. The Duma also adopted a law that effectively banned many rights and cultural symbols of the LGBT community as well as new legislation curtailing peaceful assembly and criminalizing participation in unsanctioned rallies.

Greater repression did not produce more support. Putin’s popularity was still above a majority, but much lower than it had been during his first two presidential terms.<sup>12</sup> But then in 2014, Putin annexed Crimea and supported separatists in eastern Ukraine, acts explained as necessary to fight fascism and NATO in the country and finally unify a peninsula allegedly stolen from Russia when it was transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954. Putin’s war against Ukraine was popular, in part because of how it was portrayed on Kremlin-controlled airwaves. Heightened popular support from the intervention lasted long enough to make Putin’s re-election in 2018 easy, albeit in a vote that most independent observers assessed as not free or fair. Navalny tried to run for president in 2018 but was barred from doing so. By then, presidential terms had been extended from four to six years. Two years later, in early 2020, Putin proposed, and Russians ratified, constitutional amendments that further strengthened executive authority and would allow him to stay in power until 2036.

And yet, the following year—the beginning of Putin’s third decade in power—proved to be his most repressive. In earlier eras, Putin and his advisors pretended to practice democracy with qualifying adjectives and targeted for repression specific opposition organizations and individuals. Today, they are no longer even pretending and seem to care little about condemnation from domestic or international critics, having arrested, banned, or chased into exile even their most marginal opponents in civil society and the media.

In August 2020, Putin’s henchmen brazenly poisoned Navalny with a Novichok nerve agent; he only survived by being medically evacuated to Germany. When Navalny bravely returned to Russia in January 2021, he was immediately arrested for the alleged crime of violating his parole by flying to Germany—unconscious, on a life support system. In June 2021,

Navalny's Foundation Against Corruption was designated an "extremist organization" and forced to close; affiliated political leaders could therefore not participate in parliamentary elections. According to the independent vote-monitoring organization Golos, roughly nine-million Russians are now ineligible to run for elected office as a result of recent changes to electoral laws.<sup>13</sup> One of Navalny's closest collaborators, leading opposition figure and lawyer Lyubov Sobol, was forced to end her campaign and was criminally charged for "inciting violations of sanitary restrictions" related to the covid-19 pandemic while organizing demonstrations.<sup>14</sup> She fled the country, as did Navalny's press secretary, Kira Yarmysh, former Duma deputy Dmitry Gudkov, and many other Russian political activists.

Putin's regime also squelched independent media outlets, blacklisted journalists, and designated entities such as the Institute for Law and Public Policy, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Meduza, and the Insider as "foreign agents." Attacking internet freedom, the regime blocked dozens of websites, including those of Navalny and the human-rights association Team 29, Czech Radio's Russian-language page, and the human-rights project Gulagu.net. In July 2021, the investigative news group Proekt was declared an "undesirable" organization and shut down; its editor-in-chief, Roman Badanin, fled the country. One month later, the Ministry of Justice added the news channel TV Rain and Golos to their foreign-agents list. The Kremlin also banned five Europe-based organizations (the Freedom of Information Society, Khodorkovsky Foundation, Oxford Russia Fund, Future of Russia Foundation, and European Choice), and dissolved St. Petersburg State University's collaboration with Bard College of New York.<sup>15</sup> In the run-up to the September 2021 parliamentary elections, Russian repression increased in scale and scope, resembling pre-Gorbachev Soviet days.

Why—and why now? Rhetorically, Putin and his propagandists increasingly obsess about threats from the West, and the United States in particular, urging "vigilance" against a CIA-orchestrated color revolution, which pro-Putin commentators claim was attempted last year in Belarus when massive protests erupted after Alyaksandr Lukashenka claimed victory in a falsified presidential election. Public-opinion polls suggest another explanation. Of course, accurate polling in autocracies is always difficult; those living under dictatorship and heavy surveillance have rational reasons to falsify their preferences. Yet even under these conditions, Russian polling firms have captured a significant decline in support for Putin. In July 2021, Putin's approval rating had fallen to 64 percent from a high of 89 percent in 2015, and only 31 percent of survey respondents listed the president when asked which public figures they most trusted. The Russian government's approval rating stood at 47 percent.<sup>16</sup> Putin's party, United Russia, enjoys even lower support. Those most dissatisfied with the political system are Russia's youth.<sup>17</sup> The economy remains stagnant, due to Western sanctions

levied after Putin's military intervention in Ukraine, the pandemic, and inattention to policy reform. The adrenaline rush from annexation and war in 2014 is unlikely to spike again with another military adventure. The space for independent entrepreneurial activity has shriveled, tens of thousands of Russia's best and brightest have emigrated, and the share of Russians who want to follow them has hit record highs.<sup>18</sup> Twenty-one years under Putin seem to have left some Russians exhausted. Many compare this current era to Brezhnev's *zastoi*, with commensurate levels of repression. If Putin previously relied more on his popularity than on repression to maintain power, the balance has since reversed.

### Transition from Authoritarian Rule Again?

Brezhnev's *zastoi*, however, is a cautionary tale for those hoping that the current malaise and growing frustration in Russian society will crystallize to produce regime change. It did not under Brezhnev. Only leadership change at the top triggered reforms, which then allowed social and political forces in the Soviet Union to aggregate and push for change. Putin is set in his authoritarian ways. He has expanded the percentage of the economy owned or controlled by the state, so that millions of state employees rely on him for their salaries. He has invested heavily in modernizing and expanding state institutions of coercive surveillance. And he has refined and propagated an ideology anchored around illiberal, anti-Western, orthodox values that appeals to a large constituency. We will never know if Putin could win a free and fair election again, because there will never be such an election while he remains in power. Successful revolution against Putin's dictatorship seems unlikely.

What happens to Russian autocracy after Putin, however, is more uncertain. The current regime is deeply tied to Putin personally. Strikingly, Putin has failed at building an effective political party; United Russia bears little resemblance to the CPSU or the Chinese Communist Party today. Those leading the "power" ministries—the so-called *siloviki*—will try to sustain Putinism after Putin. But we should not overestimate their capacities, since Putin does not maintain power only through repression, and repression is all that these ministries know.

Russian economic elites are divided. Those enriched by Putin's rule want him to stay in the Kremlin. Those who acquired their fortunes before Putin, as well as those in the real private sector who became wealthy by navigating cautiously around his regime, have little enthusiasm for the current political order. Companies reliant on international markets and capital for expansion are especially impatient with Russia's current isolation and Western sanctions resulting from Putin's belligerent foreign policies. Amazingly, new political movements offering an alternative future have survived the truly treacherous late Putin years, demonstrating the appeal of their ideas, the resilience of their convic-

tions, and the strength of their political, organizational, and media skills. There is a reason Navalny sits in prison today; Putin fears him. Those empowered or enriched by Putin will fear Navalny and others like him even more in a world without Putin.

Finally, Russian society is one of the world's richest and most highly educated that is still ruled by dictatorship. How long will Russia buck the centuries-long trend of modernization fostering democratization? In most of Europe, earlier waves of democratic failure planted seeds for subsequent success. Russia is a European country. Even the cultural pull of joining—or more precisely, returning to—Europe might foster democratic change in the long run, as long as illiberal populist movements across the continent do not derail democracy in the short run.

Russians are shaped but not trapped forever by historical legacies, immutable cultural norms, or static institutions. If some Russians in the past took decisions that produced autocracy, others in the future might make choices that engender democracy. It happened before and can again. In addition, specific structural factors—such as education levels, GDP per capita, the emergence of a middle class not dependent on the state, or even urbanization—might pressure the regime in the future.

Modernization theories, however, are bad at point predictions. Agency theories also deliver little predictive power about the specific moments of regime change since chance, *fortuna*, mistakes, or unexpected exogenous shocks (such as economic meltdown, war, or the death of a leader) always seem to play a major role in these models.<sup>19</sup> Both structural and agency theoretical traditions shed only faint light on current regime stability or guidance about future change.

But which is the more radical prediction—that Putinism will survive another two decades or that a new system, possibly a democratic one, will replace it? The former seems much more unlikely than the latter.

## NOTES

1. In 2021, Freedom House gave Russia a global freedom score of 20 out of 100, Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index ranked Russia 150 of 180 countries, and the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index gave Russia a score of 3.31 and a rank of 124 of 167 countries. See Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2021: Russia"; Reporters Without Borders, "Russia," <https://rwsf.org/en/russia>; and the Economic Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2020: In Sickness and in Health*.

2. On third versus fourth waves, see Michael McFaul, "The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship: Noncooperative Transitions in the Postcommunist World," *World Politics* 54 (January 2002): 212–44.

3. Barbara Geddes, "What Do We Know about Democratization After Twenty Years?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (June 1999): 115–44; and Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

4. Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 265.



5. Michael McFaul, *Russia's Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 85.

6. Mikhail Zygar, *All the Kremlin's Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016), 8–9.

7. Some have assessed that Russian intelligence services carried out these terrorist attacks and then blamed the Chechens. See John Dunlop, *The Moscow Bombings of September 1999: Examinations of Russian Terrorist Attacks at the Onset of Vladimir Putin's Rule*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Stuttgart: Ibidem Press, 2014).

8. On the nuances and complexities of Putin's regime, see Timothy Frye, *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2021).

9. As the U.S. ambassador to Russia at the time, my only "meeting" with the entire leadership of the democratic opposition was a chance encounter as I was leaving Medvedev's residence, when they were meeting with him to discuss political reforms.

10. Alexey Navalny, "Only Action Against Corruption Can Solve the World's Biggest Problems," *Guardian*, 19 August 2021.

11. Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon, 1966), 418.

12. In November 2001 and 2006, Putin's approval rating had reached 80 percent and 81 percent, respectively. By November 2013, the figure had fallen to 61 percent; see "Indicators: Putin's Approval Rating," Levada Center, <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/>.

13. "Nine Million Russians 'Deprived of Right to Be Elected,'" Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, June 23, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russians-right-to-be-elected/31322172.html>.

14. "Russia Opposition Figure Lyubov Sobol Sentenced Over Pro-Navalny Protests," *Moscow Times*, 3 August 2021.

15. "Here's Who the Russian Authorities Blacklisted and Blocked in July," *Meduza*, 30 July 2021, <https://meduza.io/en/short/2021/07/30/here-s-who-the-russian-authorities-blacklisted-and-blocked-in-july>; "Banned Russian Investigative News Outlet Says It Won't Be Silenced," Reuters, 16 July 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/proekt-investigative-news-outlet-banned-by-russia-closes-legal-entity-2021-07-16>; Stephanie Saul, "In Banning Bard College, Russia Send a Message," *New York Times*, 6 August 2021.

16. "Indicators: Putin's Approval Rating," *Levada Center*; "Trust in Politicians, Approval of Institutions and the Status of the Country," *Levada Center*, 30 July 2021, <https://www.levada.ru/2021/07/30/doverie-politikam-odobrenie-institutov-i-polozhenie-del-v-strane-4>.

17. Denis Volkov, Stepan Goncharov, and Maria Snegovaya, "Russian Youth and Civic Engagement," Center for European Policy Analysis, 29 September 2020, <https://cepa.org/russian-youth-and-civic-engagement>.

18. "Share of Russians Willing to Move Abroad Hits Decade High—Poll," *Moscow Times*, 9 June 2021; "National and International Migration in Russia from 1990 to 2019, by Flow," Statista, [www.statista.com/statistics/1009483/emigration-and-immigration-russia](http://www.statista.com/statistics/1009483/emigration-and-immigration-russia).

19. Daniel Treisman, "Democracy by Mistake: How the Errors of Autocrats Trigger Transitions to Freer Government," *American Political Science Review* 114 (August 2020): 792–810.