

The Legacy of Tandemocracy

Russia's political elite during Putin's third presidency: Interview with the sociologist Olga Kryshanovskaya

by Ilja Viktorov

The period of Dmitry Medvedev's presidency in 2008–2012, that is, the duumvirate of Dmitry Medvedev as president and Vladimir Putin as prime minister, is usually referred to in Russian media as *tandemocratia*, or “tandemocracy”. Now, two years after Putin's comeback as president, how would you describe the experience of tandemocracy for the Russian political system?

“The effect was twofold. First, we witnessed a division of power in Russia when two power centers co-existed, the Kremlin and the White House.¹ From today's perspective, it seems that both Putin and Medvedev followed the agreement they made before Medvedev won the presidential elections in 2008. Putin did not interfere in Medvedev's presidency, even though most observers believed that Putin continued to steer the country and Medvedev was just a marionette. But this was not the case. Putin granted Medvedev a degree of independence, while at the same time certain things, in accordance with their agreement, were kept outside Medvedev's control. I regularly follow the people named ‘key men’ (*kliucheviki*) in Russia. There are about 75 officials who hold key positions at the top of the Russian power hierarchy. None of these 75 key men was dismissed or replaced by Medvedev – none. Medvedev had to agree with Putin on all decisions concerning the most important appointments. Aside from that, Medvedev generally had a free hand to pursue his policy, and some things he implemented did not appeal to Putin. Nevertheless, this was indeed a division of power, though of a specifically Russian sort. Tandemocracy was a great novelty in Russian political history with its tradition of autarchy. The supreme power, usually referred to in a somewhat abstract way as ‘the Kremlin’, is assumed to be above the legislative, executive, and judiciary powers. The same system of autarchy existed during Putin's two presidencies. But under Medvedev, it happened that the model of the absolute power was temporarily transformed. Two power centers coexisted between 2008 and 2012.

“Second, this rather unclear division of power inevitably led to some degree of chaos inside the Russian political elite. One rather trivial example is the following. It might happen occasionally that meetings were scheduled at the same time in both the Kremlin and the White House, and some ministers just could not decide which meeting was most important. Even day-to-day politics was affected by this division. Tandemocracy led to a more important



Olga Kryshstanovskaya.

consequence, namely the fragmentation of the elite. This finally resulted in huge demonstrations that took place in the winter of 2011–2012 and that accompanied the transition of the presidential power from Medvedev to Putin. This protest movement was able to take place only because it was supported by part of the political elite. The latter decided that Medvedev had a good chance of being reelected to a second presidency. Those people in the elite who did not hold the most important offices but rather held less powerful positions understood that if Medvedev remained president, their career opportunities might be considerably improved. Putin reacted to opposition from this part of the elite rather painfully and interpreted their behavior as treachery. As a result, some very high-placed officials who wanted to keep Medvedev as president lost their offices. Thus, tandemocracy provoked a tension inside the Russian political elite.

“The fragmentation of the elite under Medvedev happened along generational lines as well. Medvedev, as the youngest political leader in the recent history of Russia, wanted to see younger people in the state apparatus, a goal he actually publicly promised to pursue on several occasions. When it did not contradict his informal agreement with Putin, he did appoint newcomers, as happened with Russian regional leaders, or governors. Under Medvedev,

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professorship at the University of Glasgow, also publishes extensively in international academic journals. She has been a “spin doctor” for such politicians as Gorbachev, Chernomyrdin, Nemtsov, and Lebed. She has also worked on the president’s staff and for the Duma, the Rus-

sian parliament. Ilya Viktorov, an economic historian affiliated with CBEES, met her in Cambridge to discuss Russian political elites and their role in the political process in Russia during the late years of Medvedev’s presidency, and the current rule of Vladimir Putin.

the average age of governors decreased by fourteen years; before his presidency they had constituted one of the oldest parts of the bureaucracy. One of Medvedev's mistakes was to make public the 'presidential staff reserve', a list of relatively young politicians and professionals. It was supposed, though not guaranteed, that these persons would be appointed to higher office. But these persons, and to some degree the public, understood it to mean that such appointments would be made in the immediate future. Journalists approached presumptive candidates with questions such as 'When will your next appointment be announced, and which office will it be?' Most of these persons never received any appointment at the top of the Russian bureaucracy. Naturally, this provoked some irritation among the

people in the 'presidential staff reserve', but also among those in the younger generation who were pro-governmental activists and politicians hoping to begin their careers.

"At the same time, Medvedev's promise irritated the older generation of bureaucrats who feared losing their offices. If you decide to incorporate newcomers, you should first decide what to do with old-timers. But Medvedev never solved this problem. Historically, the rotation of the political elite has posed a tremendous problem for Russian leaders. In political

"We may hypothesize that Putin inherited not only presidential power in Russia but also presidential business."

systems where elections are the true mechanism for such rotation, this type of problem can be solved more easily. You lose an election and leave politics. But in an authoritarian system where elections are fictional or of very limited significance, the rotation problem is much greater. When such dismissals among the elite take place, these old insiders, or 'ex-elite', may constitute a headache for those in power since they know too much and thus are potentially dangerous. That is why our country always had a tradition of the sinecure. I prefer to define such honorable offices and positions without real influence, reserved for resigned politicians, as 'ex-elite zones'. Sinecures existed during the Soviet era and consisted of various consultants in the Soviet army or at the Supreme Soviet, the Parliament. Ambassadorial appointments fulfilled the same function. Since the onset of perestroika, this system of ex-elite channeling was destroyed, and that was one of the reasons for both Gorbachov's as well as Yeltsin's bankruptcy as politicians. They got rid of the old elite, which then joined the opposition in the street. The ex-elite itself became a dangerous opposition. Putin tried to rebuild this system of rotation, but under Medvedev this balance was threatened again, which provoked irritation inside the political elite. Against the background of this tension, the opposition started its active protest movement, which appealed to a broad segment of the population in the capital and resulted in mobilization in the form of street demonstrations in 2011 and 2012. A political revolution in Russia was imminent. It was really an extraordinarily serious crisis that those in power managed to escape only with great difficulty. In combination with Medvedev's unfulfilled promises to liberalize the political system, the split inside the Russian elite was the reason why Putin's comeback as president was so dramatic. That is why it was so difficult for him to regain his legitimacy and supreme political power."

You mentioned that Putin granted Medvedev a sphere where he could pursue his policies quite freely. Was this domain too narrow? What was permitted, and what was prohibited according to their informal agreement? And how can we actually be certain about this?

Medvedev had to agree with Putin on all decisions concerning the most important appointments. Aside from that he had free hands.

PHOTOS:
WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



“I believe that, besides appointments to the highest government offices, Medvedev was permitted to do almost everything. Naturally, we cannot possess exact knowledge about what these two men agreed to; we know nothing about their real conversations. The political system in Russia at the top remains strictly closed to outsiders. What we can do as researchers is observe the visible results of their decision making. Our method is similar to what was employed by old Kremlinologists during the Cold War. I identify myself as a Kremlinologist in terms of applying the same research methods. How could I conclude that appointments of the 75 key men at the top of the Russian political system remained within Putin’s domain of power? I just observed meticulously all resignations and appointments and came to the conclusion that nothing had changed in this sphere during Medvedev’s presidency. Applying the same method, I determined in what year the decision to appoint Medvedev as Putin’s successor was made. I just made a list of people who had worked or studied with Medvedev and were known to be his friends. This information is not secret and is accessible to the public. It was a list of 55 persons. And I discovered that most of these persons moved from St. Petersburg to Moscow in 2005 when Medvedev was appointed as the first deputy prime minister. For me as a researcher this confirmed that, starting in 2005, Medvedev needed his own group of trusted people to strengthen his position. As we know with hindsight, this had few practical results for him in terms of acquiring independence and keeping the presidential office, but such an attempt was undertaken. Thus, there is a great probability that the decision of Putin’s successor as president was made as early as 2005.”

The Winter of Discontent, 2011–2012: An unfinished Russian revolution

Now back to these spectacular social protests during the Winter of Discontent, 2011–2012. What role did the old “Family” power group² play in provoking and supporting these mass protests in Moscow, both financially and organizationally?

“Nobody knows precisely. There are just rumors that they did play a direct role in this process. But as a researcher, I cannot rely on rumors, and I possess no precise information that would confirm or refute this statement. But there is one important fact that confirms the succession of what can be called ‘presidential business’ from Yeltsin to Putin. In the 1990s, Yeltsin and his daughter Tatyana D’yachenko created what I call ‘a presidential business’, the company Urals, which was the main oil trader in Russia. Tatyana D’yachenko’s second husband, Leonid, was its head. Leonid D’yachenko disappeared from the scene after his divorce from Tatyana, but Urals subsequently co-founded the company Gunvor.³ Based on this fact, we may hypothesize that Putin inherited not only presidential power in Russia but also presidential business and that Tatyana D’yachenko was directly involved in this process. It is probable that the Family group was able to decide that the younger, promising Medvedev was a more suitable candidate for the presidential elections in 2012, and that no reason existed for Putin’s comeback as president. It is a reasonable hypothesis, but it lacks any confirmation since the mechanisms of ultimate power in Russia are informal and closed to the public.”

Such a state of affairs, when some informal power groups can intervene in politics and the most important decisions are made by a closed circle of people — what does it say about Russia’s political system?



Boris Yeltsin.



Tatyana D'yachenko (now Yumasheva).



PHOTO: BOGOMOLOV.PL / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Moscow rally,
February 4,
2012,
Yakimanka
Street,
Bolotnaya.

“Well, some kind of informal decision-making is present in all political systems.”

Yes, but still, in countries with developed political institutions, informal groups cannot steer the political process to the same degree as occurs in the post-Soviet realm.

“I think there is one important reason why the political system in Russia works the way it does. Ideally, institutions should frame the system of checks and balances. But in reality, there is no division of power in Russia, which means that informal groups have to undertake this role, to constitute a system of checks and balances themselves. Such a structure of power has traditionally been predominant in Russia, with historical roots going back many years. It existed during the Soviet era as well as during the pre-Soviet period. And because the real Russian politics remains strictly closed to outsiders, it is very difficult to study the political process. As a researcher, I am not so interested in decisions and actions undertaken by particular persons, but prefer to study what kind of resources, both political and financial, a certain informal group can mobilize. Political struggle is always about a struggle for resources needed by particular groups. And now back to your question about the role that the Family group played during the transition of presidential power from Medvedev to Putin. We might presume that some kind of affiliation existed between the Family and Medvedev, though there are no solid facts that would support this theory. But even if such a connection had existed, we must admit that this group could not rely on the same power and financial resources in 2012 as it used to do in 1999 or 2000. This might be one of the main reasons why Medvedev was always losing political struggles. Those elite groups that supported him lacked sufficient resources to win this struggle.”

Could the social and political protests that took place in Moscow in 2011 and 2012 lead to a change of political power in Russia without relying on support from parts of the Russian political elite?

“Definitely not. I do not believe a revolution is possible where huge masses of people storm the Kremlin and the power structure collapses. This is impossible. There was a pyramid, a hierarchy of movements and interests, which constituted these protests. Discontented people in the street formed just the very bottom of this pyramid. At higher levels, you could find staunch, fanatical adherents of particular ideas as well as more pragmatic politicians who wanted to get into power themselves, and then there were certain financial interests. There were also paramilitary forces that were trained in camps in certain Russian regions and were to be used as part of a resistance against the

government. But these forces were never mobilized, and the 2012 protests never exploded as those in Ukraine did this winter. There was a possibility of a 'Kiev scenario' in Russia, but in 2012 it did not materialize."

Why was it that this threshold of the political revolution was never crossed?

"Several factors contributed to this outcome. The first one was that the opposition failed to gather a 'march of the millions' in the streets. The number of those who participate in street protests does indeed matter in all revolutions. We have just seen that millions of Ukrainians came to their Maidans all over the country. This human mass itself did have an impact on the political process. Here in Russia, the opposition failed to gather millions. What we saw was an intelligentsia which in quite traditional ways tried to question those in power. Our center made several sociological studies at those meetings and I can say with certainty that it was our old-style intelligentsia. These people failed to appeal to the millions of poor and deprived in Russia, since they didn't speak the same language. If that potential social protest of the poor had joined the intelligentsia's protest, it could have posed a real danger to those in power. But this never took place.

"Then, Putin demonstrated a certain political wisdom. He is probably not successful in terms of political strategy, but his tactical approach was very well thought through. He applied the policy of threats and bribery. The potential social base of the opposition among the poor was neutralized by increased state spending on various benefits and social programs. At the same time, Putin pursued a very harsh policy towards the opposition leaders. Each leader was taken and punished in a different way. Some of them were discredited, some were arrested. And Putin won this struggle in the end. The other side of the coin is the question how long this victory will endure."

Putin's psychology as a leader and his imperial project

Has Putin's power changed today in terms of his ability to make decisions, compared to his first and second presidencies?

"His power has certainly changed. I would not claim that it has remarkably strengthened, but Putin himself has changed as a political leader. Before, a number of factors constrained his own political will; he still had too many enemies to defeat: for example, powerful oligarchs and governors. His first presidency was devoted entirely to the elimination of these alternative power centers. Now, Putin is more self-confident and brave; he understands better how he should behave according to his inner convictions. Take the recent Crimean crisis. We have seen him challenge his opponents, quite openly. And he demonstrates an inner self-confidence that he is on the side of the truth, defined by his own beliefs. That makes ordinary people respect him. Since the Crimean crisis, his approval in the polls has skyrocketed. Now, when he speaks, he makes a persuasive impression and people trust him as a leader. It does not matter what the Western leaders say about contradictions in his speeches and policy, nor what he says that might contradict international law, and so forth. Such logic does not work in Russia, since a different paradigm of power exists here. A definition of 'effective power' is not respected here. It is a definition of 'strong power' that works in Russia."

Do you really think that Putin has convictions? That he is more than just a pragmatic politician who moves with the wind and tries to maintain power?

"Yes, I believe he possesses convictions, which originate from two sources. First, there is his experience in the KGB, where he was trained and where he worked. For many years, I studied the psychology of secret services, so I know what I am talking about here. Second, there is Putin's passion for the martial arts of East Asia, which also made a deep impression on him. This interest is not limited to the acquisition of some skills; it also comprises a certain philosophical attitude and lifestyle. So these influences, in a very strange mix, intersected in Putin as a person. But nevertheless, the qualities originating from his KGB past are still very strong. To achieve his aims, Putin is ready to manipulate public opinion and the people. I would characterize him as an 'imperian', to avoid aspects of the definition of 'imperialist' that would not adequately describe Putin. He is an adherent of the idea of the Russian Empire. On that point he enjoys support from the majority of the Russian political elite today, which, until recently, had been critical of him. While not visible to the public, this criticism required taking a stronger stance towards the West. This meant that the elite itself criticized Putin from a more conservative position. For the same reasons, this very elite hated Medvedev and desired Putin's comeback. And they welcomed his return and hoped that he would create order with a firm hand. All these people share the same ideology. This is not the ideology of the nation-state which in fact

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set the guidelines for official Russian policy during most of the post-Soviet period. What this conservative elite prefers is the ideology of a great empire, an ideology that unfolded quite openly during the recent Crimean crisis.”

Do you believe that Putin will continue to build up his empire inside the current borders of the Russian Federation including Crimea? Or would he prefer to claim additional territories?

“I believe that if Putin went beyond the cases of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Crimea, it would mean self-destruction for him from a political point of view. I believe rather that he will continue to transform Russia into an empire inside its current borders. And some Soviet-style clichés like ‘friendship of peoples’ will return in the political discourse. That is because the idea of ‘Russia for Russians’ is impossible to reconcile with the imperial discourse. The model of the nation-state can probably work in Kazakhstan or Ukraine, but not in Russia. It may happen that Putin will occasionally use nationalistic ideas for political manipulation, but this is not his ideology.

“The demand for imperial resurgence revealed itself during the Crimean crisis. For the first time in my career as a researcher, I can confirm that the people and the powers that be are united. For Russia, this is a unique situation because an antagonism between society and those in charge is the norm for our country. And this consolidation is taking place because Putin touched very deep feelings experienced by the people. They used to live in the USSR, the country that led the Second World. Then the empire collapsed, and this Russian ‘ground zero’ continued throughout the post-Soviet epoch. The population went through a severe, traumatic trial when the Russians lost all the values that gave them orientation and a sense of self-respect. During these decades, our center conducted public opinion polls, and people simply could not answer the question, ‘Are there any things or values in Russia you can be proud of?’ In the Soviet era, there were propaganda clichés like the space program, nuclear weapons, and even ‘the best ice cream in the world’, but later these clichés were lost. And now we are witnessing a resurgence of the sense of national pride. The acquisition of Crimea was welcomed by the population to such a degree that it has given Putin new strength. And he is trying to catch this wind to pursue a tougher policy, to implement unpopular measures, at least while he still feels this strength.”

Siloviki and the New Aristocracy in Russia

Four years ago, at the ICCEES congress in Stockholm, you said that the proportion of *siloviki* in the state apparatus was decreasing.⁴ Has this trend continued?

“No, that tendency has been reversed. According to my calculations, under Medvedev the proportion of *siloviki* was decreasing and in 2011 constituted about 20% of the total number of the Russian top bureaucracy. After 2012, when Putin returned to the presidency, the proportion increased again to a level of 47% today. The presidential administration was the state authority most affected in this respect. However, there is a difference between the time of Putin’s first presidency and the current situation in the recruitment of *siloviki*. After 1999, it was mainly Putin’s people who came to power simply because they had worked with him at some point in the past. Now we have seen the formation of new networks associated with specific persons who belong to Putin’s inner circle. These networks are used by the most influential officials to promote their interests inside the government and the presidential administration. And they also have a background in the security services.”

“Putin does not believe in any abstract friends and does not trust anyone. He always sees enemies and tries to defeat particular ones.”

But why did this return of the *siloviki* take place? Is there any demand or pressure from society itself?

“No, there is no such demand from society. It is the supreme power that needs that kind of people. And this recruiting policy is implemented quite consciously. *Siloviki* speak the same language, they understand the meaning of the word ‘enemy’. They are trained to see and identify enemies where other people do not see any. For example, people without a background in security services believe that Russia can have friends in the West. *Siloviki* on the other hand do

not believe in such a possibility, they know that in the West there are only enemies. Their psychology and logic are formed by this mode of thinking. That is why such a high degree of negativism is present in Putin’s policy. He does not believe in any abstract friends and does not trust anyone. He always sees enemies and tries to defeat particular ones. Besides that, the *siloviki* – I mean those with a background in the security services, not those from the military – work behind masks using some kind of invented legends. This gives them more opportunities to manipulate people. It means that you need to learn a great deal if you want to work with Putin. That is why it is easier for them to

recruit a professional from the security services directly than to train somebody else. This explains why the proportion of *siloviki* has increased again in the Russian top bureaucracy. Naturally, there are always exceptions to the rule, but what's most likely for the immediate future is that the logic of the *siloviki* will dominate Russian politics."

Do the representatives of the supreme power in today's Russia strive to transfer their social status to their children? Is there any form of nepotism in post-Soviet Russia?

"Nepotism exists in all types of societies, including the Western democracies, and Russia is no exception. But there is one peculiarity here, namely that we are witnessing a very rapid formation of a new aristocracy in the country. In contrast to the Soviet system, where elite status could not be inherited, in contemporary Russia such an inheritance does take place. And this is a very serious transformation of the social structure. A rich official no longer loses his status after his resignation. He capitalizes on his position, transforms it into a business, and promotes his children and grandchildren. In short, a new class of rich people is emerging, a hereditary aristocracy, which is still not legitimized in the Russian collective consciousness. This is because the public knows very little about this process. What leaks to the public are occasional reports in the media about, for example, the young son of a rich official who causes a traffic accident while driving his luxury automobile. But the real scale of the formation of the new aristocracy is not visible, even though this transformation is actually of huge importance."

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Is this transformation ultimately negative, or will it contribute to the stability of the political system in the future?

"I cannot answer this question definitively. The presence of an aristocracy was usually accompanied by some kind of meritocracy, some incorporation of talented people into the elite. When such incorporation was not possible, it led to the degradation of the state apparatus, which also happened in Russian history. In Britain, for example, there is a hereditary aristocracy, but it is almost invisible. They do not openly demonstrate their status and wealth, and the everyday life of citizens is not affected by the privileges of the aristocracy. A transformation in that direction has not yet happened in Russia, even though political power and business have actually merged in Russia. To constitute a stabilizing factor in Russian society, the new aristocracy should learn to abandon its outrageous demonstration of its status, wealth, and neglect of the rank-and-file." ❌

notes

1 The residence of the Russian government and prime minister in Moscow is referred to in the media as the White House.

2 "The Family" is an informal power group that arose around President Yeltsin's family members and entrusted oligarchs during his second presidency in the late 1990s. The group includes Yeltsin's daughter Tatyana D'yachenko (now Yumasheva), her

third husband Valentin Yumashev, previously a ghost writer of Yeltsin's memoirs and head of the Presidential Administration, and some famous oligarchs without direct family connections to president Yeltsin. One of the powerful "Family" oligarchs, Oleg Deripaska, is married to Yumashev's daughter.

3 Under Vladimir Putin as president, the oil

trading company Gunvor, registered in Cyprus, became one of the main exporters of Russian oil and one of the largest commodity trading companies in the world. One of Gunvor's co-founders and principal owners, Gennady Timchenko, is usually referred to in the media as Vladimir Putin's close friend. In March 2014, after the recent Crimean

crisis, the United States introduced sanctions against Timchenko, who sold his share in Gunvor to his partner, the Swedish citizen Torbjörn Törnqvist.

4 The term *siloviki*, literally "people of power", is used in Russia to denote representatives of the security and military services in political and administrative authorities as well as in big business.