



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°9 | October 2020


Fondation Pierre du Bois
pour l'histoire du temps présent

Vladimir Putin: Twelve More Years ?

Vassily A. Klimentov *

At the Republican National Convention in late August, supporters of President Donald J. Trump chanted “Twelve more years”. They made clear that they would not only welcome President Trump’s re-election in November 2020 but also that they would be fine with him circumventing the American Constitution to run for two additional mandates after that. While this umpteenth provocation was incited by President Trump himself who moreover suggested that any other result than his victory in the Presidential election would mean that the vote was rigged, it came as another reminder of the dangerous authoritarian tendencies rising in the United States. Dismissed as in jest by most Republicans, such statements do cut at the fabric of American democracy. After years of Washington promoting, including often by force of arms, the Western model of government, it is striking that it has become mainstream in America to challenge its foundation. It is furthermore dismaying that what has for now been only a joke in the United States is the reality of many authoritarian countries that see their strongmen stay in power indefinitely. In this regard, Americans would better keep in mind that today’s joke may quickly become tomorrow’s reality.

Authoritarian Constitutional Reform

The Russian authorities have recently passed a controversial constitutional reform that allows current President Vladimir Putin to run for two additional mandates of six years after the end of his current term in 2024, so another twelve years as President. The previous Constitution limited Vladimir Putin’s ability to serve for another consecutive presidential mandate after his current one while he had already served three terms as President (now finishing the fourth one) and one as Prime Minister since 1999. The reform now allows him to remain as President until 2036, potentially ruling Russia for a shocking 36 years. This would be only one year less than Ivan the Terrible in the 16th century and considerably more than any Soviet leader. With this constitutional reform, Russia is in fact moving further away from its flawed democratic experiment of the 1990s to embrace the authoritarian model of government that it has known under different guises throughout its history.

In addition to the aforementioned amendment on Presidential terms, the constitutional reform introduced over 200 modifications to Russia’s previous Constitution, the product of the constitutional crisis of fall 1993 that had seen President Boris Yeltsin consolidate the primacy of the Executive power over that of the Russian parliament. This mishmash of amendments has considerably reinforced the role of the President while limiting that of the Prime Minister, the other Ministers, and the Federal Assembly; strengthened the control of the Executive branch over the Judiciary one; created a new State Council, an ill-defined body that is to be formed by and answer only to the President and coordinate the designing of domestic and foreign policy; put further limitations on the capacity of Russians from the diaspora to hold official positions in Russia, including running to be President; and limited the independence of local authorities from the Kremlin on a series of issues.

On social and cultural aspects, the reform strengthened the place of the Russian language, enshrined that the Russian Federation was the successor state of the Soviet Union, forbade the “falsification of history” – a provocative concept given how President Putin himself has recently engaged in to say the least controversial historical re-interpretations,¹ reinforced the role of the Christian Orthodox religion, and limited marriage to being between a man and a woman. At different levels, these modifications reinforced the control of Vladimir Putin over the Russian state while continuing the trend long promoted by the Kremlin of opposing Russia to the “liberal radical” and “decadent” Europe around issues such as typically gay marriage. In short, the constitutional reform was aimed at eliciting support from pro-governmental constituencies, including among nationalist, conservative, and patriotic groups and civil servants, at the expense of preserving the characteristics of a democratic, secular, and multi-national state.



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°9 | October 2020

After being greenlighted by the Federal Assembly of Russia in March, the constitutional reform was put to a national referendum that lasted from 25 June to 1 July 2020 and allowed for online and in-person voting. The extended period of voting was meant to by-pass the raging COVID-19 pandemic that had in Russia led to an inept governmental response which raised questions among the population and from observers abroad – no less due to the suspiciously low lethality rate of the coronavirus in Russia given the staggering amount of cases.² Marred by irregularities – one journalist from the independent online television channel *Dozhd'* has showed that it was possible to vote twice (in-person and online)³ – the referendum officially resulted in some 78% of the voters nationwide approving the constitutional reform. That seemingly massive support nevertheless contrasted with pre-referendum and exit polls taken in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg by independent polling agencies and opposition groups that showed significantly more opposition.⁴ In fact, opposition to the reform was pregnant despite the fact that the weeks before the vote saw a propaganda campaign for the reform from governmental outlets – including a homophobic video advert and one featuring famous artists – while conversely advocacy against the reform was forbidden.

In the last analysis, this authoritarian reform was the sign that the Russian regime wanted to feel secure at home. It was not in this sense – as often interpreted – a sign of its strength but one of its weakness, a reassurance for the elites amidst fears of domestic unrest. Since 2014 and the Ukrainian crisis, the Kremlin has locked itself into a confrontation with the West that seems to have no end in sight – even less so if President Trump is defeated in November. Yet, opposition with the West and denunciations of European and American meddling in Russia's affairs can only maintain domestic loyalty for so long in a context of economic morass and evident better quality of life in Western and Central Europe than in Russia. Whatever the pro-regime political, economic, and cultural elites say as part of domestic propaganda, they still have businesses and assets abroad, rely on Western technology, their children attend American and European schools, and they prefer to seek healthcare in Germany rather than in Russia. In this sense, at the difference of the Soviet period, the elites are often undermining their own propaganda of celebration of the Russian model. Beyond this, it is increasingly evident that the appeal of Russia has been falling within the post-Soviet space, including as part of the Ukrainian crisis.

Over the past decade, the Russian authorities oversaw a massive degradation of the economy. If Vladimir Putin's popularity had been in the 2000s propelled by a promise of order and the real improvement of the living conditions in Russia for the majority of the population thanks to the trickling down of the benefits from oil and gas exports, things have worsened in the 2010s. Economic and financial crises since 2008, western sanctions and Russian retaliatory counter-sanctions since 2014, the "oil war" with Saudi Arabia and the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 have shattered the Russian economy. Meanwhile, the authorities were unable to diversify it away from exporting raw resources and mitigate the impact of these issues, notably of COVID-19, on ordinary Russians. Living standards have plummeted while the fight against corruption has continued to be mostly for show. In the last *Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index*, Russia ranked as the 137 country out of a total of 198, one of the worst scores among post-Soviet countries ahead of only Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.⁵

On a political level, the constitutional reform was the recognition that the only glue holding the Russian regime together and ensuring the loyalty to it of a still considerable part of the population was the figure of Vladimir Putin. As the latter uncannily noted himself, 'if the [constitutional amendments] were not adopted, in a couple of years, I know it by my own experience, instead of normal rhythmic work at many levels of power, there will be people starting to sniff out in search of possible successors'.⁶ The only idea of Vladimir Putin leaving in 2024 was making the regime unstable because clientele networks would have needed to entirely reboot. This is in no way the mark of a stable system – authoritarian or not. On the contrary, the Russian regime appears to be incredibly volatile, considerably more so than the Soviet one that saw political transitions happen after power struggles in the communist party. By contrast, there are virtually no national level politicians in Russia today besides Vladimir Putin, including in his *de facto* own – "United Russia" party. There is also no ideology besides loyalty to him. President Putin towers above parties and proximity to him is the only indicator of influence for other politicians who are not independent actors. The current Prime Minister, Mikhail Mishustin, is a technocrat with no following and little name recognition. A few of the long-standing Ministers, such as Sergey Shoygu and Sergey Lavrov, and the former President Dmitry Medvedev are better known but none of them for various reasons can be a credible alternative to Putin.

This is the current state of the Russian regime. Isolated internationally with apparently cordial relations only with a series of authoritarian regimes, it has no clear prospects of improving its relations with Europe and the United States, including for example to re-integrate the G7. At the same time, it has been feeling insecure at home where signs of popular contestation have become more obvious before and after the constitutional reform. In this context, the regime's concern with domestic contestation has led to an



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°9 | October 2020

increasingly repressive attitude. While this article cannot go into analysing all such incidents, it highlights the most high-profile cases below.

Contestation and Repression

The first indicator of rising discontent in Russia has been, as is often the case, the drop in the approval of President Putin. The latter is both a telling and a slightly misleading indicator as even independent agencies credit the President with a high level of approval. Still, spring 2020 saw his approval drop below 60% of positive opinions, its lowest level since 1999. In fact, already since mid-2018, Vladimir Putin's approval stood in the mid-60%, so at levels unseen since the early 2010s.⁷ This decline was accompanied in summer 2019 by a series of protest rallies held in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg in response to the allegedly flawed Moscow City Duma elections. These became the largest protests to happen since the demonstrations of 2011-13 but also came only one year following a round of protests that accompanied the Russian pension reform in July 2018. The 2019 protests led to a particularly violent reaction by the police while many protesters were beaten up, arrested and criminal charges brought against them. Although the protests have not continued into 2020, it is notable that they showed a growing rejection of the current elites' wish to control even the local level of power.

One can note here a connection with the continuing, as of October 2020, protests in Khabarovsk in the Far East. The latter started in July following the arrest on murder charges dating back to 2004-05 of the popular local Governor Sergey Furgal, seen as too independent from the Kremlin. While the accusations came up as strange to say the least – Furgal having been in office at different levels for many years with the authorities having no problem with him – they resulted in an unexpected level of contestation that caught the Kremlin off-guard. The protest movement that mobilised several thousand people did not die down and, interestingly, did not as the previous year in Moscow lead to a violent crackdown by the police. It seemed as if the authorities did not know how to defuse local discontent, fearing what could happen if contestation was met by repression in a region where central control is notoriously lax. Across Russia, the Khabarovsk protests – even limited in scale as compared to what was simultaneously happening in Belarus – became a unique moment of reckoning because they showed that in some cases the authorities seemed to fear the consequences of repression. This realisation testified to cracks in the system and could embolden more people in other regions to test its limits.

Another remarkable series of protests happened in August in the Republic of Bashkortostan in Central Russia. Environmental protesters opposed the limestone mining operations that were to happen at Kushtau Hill, a unique natural ecosystem viewed by locals as sacred. In that instance, it is remarkable that the authorities were unable to shove aside the protesters and were forced to suspend mining operations, even if it is still unclear how things would end. As in Khabarovsk, this came as another example of local contestation of which Russia seems to have been seeing more over the past two years. Both cases are in fact not dissimilar from the high-profile case of residents massively protesting the authorities' decision to build a church in place of a popular city park in Yekaterinburg, a city in Siberia, in 2019. After demonstrations that received a nationwide echo, the authorities were then forced to abandon their plans.

Although it may be premature to draw definitive conclusions from these series of protests, the rise of local contestation against the authorities is a remarkable development in Russia and one that tends to challenge the stability of the system. Even if Vladimir Putin remains personally popular, the arbitrary system he put in place and the corrupt officials it relies on seem to be increasingly rejected by the population. In this regard, there is no doubt these protests have been worrying developments for the elites whose personal well-being is tied with the survival of the current system. It is striking that the local corruption by officials within the system is exactly what Alexei Navalny, the Russian opposition leader who was poisoned in August and is now recovering after treatment in Germany, has been denouncing through his investigative reporting on *YouTube*.⁸ On a weekly basis, his videos criticising the authorities have been aggregating millions of views.

In parallel to the rising protests, Alexei Navalny's poisoning, if it were to be connected to the authorities, was remarkably only the last in a series of incidents that seemed aimed at putting pressure on dissonant voices. In fact, the one thing that all of them had in common was that they appeared aimed at "making an example" *i.e.* scare people willing to express dissent into self-censorship, including on social media, and submission.

Among the most high-profile cases, the "Se7" (Network) Affair witnessed seven young people receive from 6 to 18 years of prison for terrorism in January 2019. The affair had a widespread echo in Russia while human rights activists stressed that most of the



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°9 | October 2020

authorities' accusations were based on the defendants' confessions allegedly extracted under torture. As of June 2020, the affair still triggered protests in Russia.⁹

In another well-known case, Ivan Golunov, a journalist working for the independent online outlet *Meduza*, was arrested on drug-related charges as he was investigating corruption among various state officials, including with ties to the Federal Security Service (FSB), the successor of the KGB, in June 2019. His arrest triggered public outcry and scrutiny of the case against him that proved to be crudely fabricated – the police published incriminating photos that were not from Golunov's apartment. Golunov was released and the case dismissed but only low-level police officers were eventually charged for falsifying evidence against him.¹⁰

Another case that had a widespread echo in the domestic and foreign media was that of the famous theatre director Kirill Serebrennikov who was accused of fraud and misusing public funds. Avoiding jail time, Serebrennikov was only condemned to a significant fine, a verdict many celebrated as a “success”, in June 2020.¹¹ Nonetheless, in a case where evidence was again limited, this too seemed to show how the authorities were eager to reign down some of Russia's subversive cultural elite.

Then, in July 2020, the court of Pskov in north-western Russia declared Svetlana Prokop'eva, a journalist from the Russian edition of *Radio Liberty*, guilty of “supporting terrorism” after she wrote an article about a terrorist attack conducted by a 17-year old man against the FSB office in Arkhangelsk, a city on the White Sea. While Prokop'eva avoided prison and only got a massive fine – a result that many similarly considered a “success” – the entire affair typically signalled to others that there were the risks associated with criticising the authorities on their handling of terrorism.¹² In a similar perspective, several cases were brought by the authorities against Russians for statements on social media that were seen as “supporting terrorism” or, more recently, questioning the official narrative about COVID-19.¹³

Another high-profile case has been that of Ivan Safronov, a well-known journalist from the newspapers *Kommersant* and *Vedomosti*. Safronov was arrested in July 2020 and accused of spying for NATO by the FSB. To date, the details of his case are kept secret by the authorities.¹⁴ The latter is however a particularly curious one as Safronov has long worked in the “Kremlin Pool” of journalists following the President, and covered the work of state agencies, such as Roscosmos – the Russian space agency. He was not necessarily a critic of the regime. After leaving *Vedomosti*, Safronov moved to work as an adviser to Roscosmos' director in May 2020. However, his arrest appeared related to his journalistic career and seemed to underscore how thin the line is in Russia between divulging state secrets and journalism. At another level, it seemed to point out to the lack of coordination between state agencies, including on security matters, that could lead to the same man being accused of treason by one agency and hired to work by another. This may be another sign of the internal anarchy of the system where, besides loyalty to Vladimir Putin, power centres are allowed to compete among themselves.

Finally, in July 2020, another high-profile affair saw the condemnation of the historian Yury Dmitriev, who used moreover to head the local office of the human rights NGO “Memorial” in Karelia, a region on the White Sea, for 3.5 years of jail for sexual assault against his foster daughter. Again, ironically, the judgment was cheered as almost a “victory” by his defenders who pointed out the unprecedented short length of the sentence for that type of crime. Counting the time he had already been detained, Dmitriev should have been released from prison already this fall. The Dmitriev Affair did however not end there. In September, the High Court of Karelia decided to increase Dmitriev's sentence to 13 years in jail. To date, it is not clear if that judgment is final. It is worth pointing out however that Dmitriev had been entirely acquitted on similar, but lesser, charges in 2018 and that the case against him again contained very scant evidence. Many in Russia and abroad see it as being politically motivated.¹⁵

In fact, Dmitriev is relatively well-known for his extensive and ground-breaking research on Stalin's repressions in Karelia, unearthing a mass execution site where thousands of people were shot dead near Sandarmokh. By many accounts, his work was becoming increasingly unnerving to local and central authorities, including from the FSB, and was contested by more “loyal” historians. As noted above, Russia is now engaged in a process of historical re-writing that is largely aimed at erasing its most violent and negative pages.

Overall, all these affairs have in substance little in common besides their political undertones and the limits of the evidence brought against the defendants, which though obviously does not mean that all of them are innocent. They have however many similarities in their form, seeing people who have unnerved the authorities bear the pressure of the state judiciary apparatus while having little ability to defend themselves. Interestingly, some of the high-profile cases (but not all of them and also not the ones targeting ordinary



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°9 | October 2020

Russians) resulted in surprisingly “lenient” verdicts, forcing defendants and sympathisers to celebrate that condemnations did not lead to these people spending years in jail. This seemed to further suggest that they were meant as tools for population control. If such was the case, it is unclear if they achieved the desired result of scaring Russians into not criticising the authorities. As the Kremlin’s uneven and often violent reaction to protests, they seemed to first of all testify to its nervousness. The authorities are now making a big deal of prosecuting opponents who in previous years might have been simply left alone.

The same goes with the poisoning of Alexei Navalny that many see as linked to some of the authorities, although not necessarily to the Kremlin.¹⁶ The poisoning seems to again be more a sign of weakness than strength of the regime. The entire affair has considerable potential to be “counter-productive” for the Kremlin. While Alexei Navalny is a prominent and popular critic of the regime and the only well-known opposition leader in Russia, his alleged poisoning seems bound to further worsen Moscow’s relations with the European Union, potentially leading to more sanctions and jeopardising the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project. This could be a monumental setback for Moscow and trigger another economic downfall that, despite the government’s propaganda, would further increase popular discontent. In this context, it is difficult to not see the attack on Alexei Navalny as either just another sign of the system’s disfunction and of the growing loss of control of Vladimir Putin over it, or as a sign that the authorities believe that all-out repression is the only way for them to maintain their hold on power.

Conclusion

The situation in Russia is at a crossroads. Since the start of Vladimir Putin’s rule, the country has rarely seen such multi-faceted contestation, powered also by the increasing popularity of its critics on social media. Since 2018, the rising protests and the number of criminal cases targeting people that the regime sees as opponents more than showing this regime’s strength appear to indicate that it is touching its limits. As Russia is about to bear the full force of the COVID-19 economic impact in fall 2020-winter 2021 when people will have depleted their savings, it is likely that even more contestation will come in 2021. Short of improving the economic situation in the short-term, Vladimir Putin’s system will then come under increased strain while it is unclear how it could defuse popular discontent. Besides the personal loyalty inspired by President Putin, it is unclear what his regime could offer Russians.

Since it has locked itself into a never-ending confrontation with the West, it has in fact few levers at its disposal to deal with potential protests other than by force. In this regard, the example of Belarus – where the Kremlin has decided to side with the incompetent and unpopular Alexander Lukashenko – should be one of a cautionary tale for Russia as it showed that even in a calcified authoritarian neo-communist regime, massive popular contestation may rise if the authorities are unable to steer the country toward economic growth and answer such a crisis as the pandemic. In such a case, repression can never be a long-term answer as it is likely – in the best of cases for the ruling elites – to only delay the issue. Today, the Russian regime seems though to have little other options; it is at its weakest point. This article started by discussing the constitutional reform and President Putin’s apparent wish to remain in power as President until 2036 but the reality is that his regime seems unlikely to last that long.

Vassily A. Klimentov

* Dr. des., The Graduate Institute, Geneva



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°9 | October 2020

- ¹ Vladimir Putin has recently authored an article in English on the history of the Second World War. Vladimir Putin, 'The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II', [The National Interest](#), 18 June 2020.
- ² Russia has adopted a unique methodology to counting deaths from COVID-19. It separates the deaths of patients that were the result of only COVID-19 from the deaths of patients that had other pathologies aside from COVID-19. Only the former category goes in the official count of COVID-19 deaths. However, since most of COVID-19 lethal cases around the world occurred among patients who had co-infections, this way of counting considerably diminishes the number of deaths. Sergey Kozlovsky, 'V Rossii ochen' nizkaya smertnost' ot koronavirusa. Kak ee schitayut?' [BBC](#), 12 May 2020.
- ³ 'Pavel Lobkov dvazhdy progolosoval po popravkam. Glava TSIK nazvala eto provokatsiei, a on – eksperimentom', [TVRain.ru](#), 25 June 2020.
- ⁴ See one example here: 'Ekzitsiynyy "Net!": pochti polovina oproshennykh moskvichei ne podderzhala popravki v Konstitutsiyu', [Znak.com](#), 1 July 2020.
- ⁵ By comparison, Belarus ranked 66 and Ukraine – 126. Transparency International, '[Corruption Perceptions Index 2019](#)', 2020.
- ⁶ Kira Latukhina, 'Rabotat', a ne iskat' preemnikov', [Rg.ru](#), 21 June 2020.
- ⁷ See the monitoring by the independent: 'Odobrenie deyatelnosti Vladimira Putina', [Levada Centre](#), September 2020. The actual rating may have been for various reasons considerably lower still.
- ⁸ See for instance [Pozitsiya Oppositsii](#) and [Alexei Navalny](#).
- ⁹ The affair is complex, see one series of articles: 'Delo Soobshchestva anarkhistov "Set"', [Kommersant](#), September 2020; Yan Shenkman, '18 let za "inoe"', [Novaya Gazeta](#), 4 September 2020.
- ¹⁰ See for example on that: 'Ivan Golunov svoboden, no eto ne konets', [Meduza](#), 14 June 2019.
- ¹¹ 'Serebrennikov poluchil uslovnyi srok. Ego priznali vinovnym v moshennichestve', [BBC](#), 26 June 2020.
- ¹² Anna Pushkarskaya, 'Zhurnalistku Prokop'evu priznali vinovnoi v opravdanii terrorizma. Ei naznachili shtraf v 500 tysyach', [BBC](#), 6 July 2020.
- ¹³ See one list of such recent cases here: 'Nakazaniya za reposty i kommentarii ne ushli na karantin', [Roskomsvoboda](#), 3 May 2020.
- ¹⁴ See one series of articles: 'Delo Ivana Safronova', [Kommersant](#), September 2020.
- ¹⁵ See this website in defence of Yury Dmitriev: '[The Dmitriev Affair](#)', 13 July 2020.
- ¹⁶ See a discussion here: Madeline Roache, 'Alexei Navalny Has Been Confirmed Poisoned by the Russian Nerve Agent Novichok. What Happens Now?', [Time](#), 4 September 2020.