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PUTIN AND RUSSIA'S CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM
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WITH

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POST-EVENT WRITTEN Q&A ANSWERS

During the webinar, the Russia Strategic Initiative and Emily Ferris were only able to answer a few questions. Emily Ferris answered the questions below that were not addressed during the event.

1. Is this potentially a facsimile of China's regional governance system? Chinese governance with "Russian characteristics" if you will?

I do think that one of the things Russia and China have most in common – although there are many things that divide them – is their approach to running their countries. Both Xi and Putin agree on the need for a tightly centralised system, built around a single leader with power in Moscow/Beijing, as well as for the need to monitor citizens (allegedly in the name of security) through state-controlled media and the internet. The system that Putin has constructed is extremely personal and particular to him – we can see this in a lot of the ideas that people like Surkov (before he was dismissed) were promoting, the concept of Putinism as a system of values about how Russia should be run that outlasts the man himself. Without knowing in detail how China's own regional government is set up, I would say that the appointment of regional governors that serve the economic and security agenda of Moscow, and ultimately Putin himself, is a distinguishing feature of the Russian system.

2. You mentioned that the regional governors are in line with the priorities of Moscow, how do they line up with the population of the different areas? How much, if any, discord have we seen from Moscow's interests verses the local population?

Aside from some of the economic purposes that I discussed in the presentation, the appointment of governors also has a security dimension. This is particularly relevant for politically restive places like Dagestan, where the long-standing regional governor was dismissed in October 2017 and replaced by Vladimir Vasilyev, who was a complete outsider. The reason for this import was to try to break up the local clan networks between ethnic groups (the Avars and the Dargins), which Moscow saw as a security risk. Here, Vasilyev is seen by the local population as a foreign import from the Kremlin who does not have any particular allegiance to a clan, and so is viewed very much as Moscow's man.

3. If Putin decides to step down, what do you think would be the likely state of Russia's internal stability?

Answered this in discussion



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RUSSIA STRATEGIC INITIATIVE



4. Emily, how legitimate do you expect the constitutional vote to be? Haven't previous Russian elections/turnouts been highly manipulated to ensure solid numbers for Putin?
Answered this in discussion

5. Hi Emily! Putin appears to say to regional governors that they should follow Moscow's example which is a de facto lockdown. Why is Putin reluctant to use the phrase state-of-emergency and resorts to "paid holiday" euphemisms? Why does the Kremlin say its up to the PM to declare when Sobyenin declared it in Moscow and Duma post facto legalised it?
Putin is keen to avoid the suggestion that Russia is in a state of emergency, as this undermines his role as security guarantor – it also presents him with the added challenge that the authorities have from the start blamed Europe's slow response to the virus for the high death rate, and any implication that Russia is on the back foot would suggest that the government is to blame for Russia's own growing death rate. The Kremlin thinking seems to be that the 'paid-holiday' euphemism also means that people are less likely to panic, and has a more cynical economic reason – if these businesses are closed for an enforced national holiday, the government does not have to support them or pay their wages. Moscow Mayor Sobyenin has already said that the region cannot afford to bail out all of the businesses and their employees, and so the 'holiday' is a way of putting off this issue.

The other somewhat confusing chain of events – when Sobyenin declared Moscow to be lockdown, Duma MPs complained that only the Duma and the President had the authority to do this, and then the Kremlin was forced to acknowledge publicly that it supported Sobyenin's decision – all points to a lack of clear direction from the Kremlin. Because of the imminent vote on the constitutional amendments (and technically Putin's popularity), Putin has tried to distance himself from any of the more unpalatable measures that are preventing Muscovites from going about their daily lives. This is why he has ensured that Prime Minister Mishustin and Sobyenin are the most visible figures issuing lockdown orders.

6. Yeltsin transitioned power to Putin with understanding. Is this move possibly just a case of Putin not being able to find a reliable person to transition power while ensuring immunity from prosecution?

Answered this in discussion

7. The party becoming "toxic." Interesting. Reminds me of the collapse of the Soviet Union, when some republics were drifting (Ukraine) and some were running (Baltic states) for the door. Could Putin be recognizing the weakening of the Russia United party as a (possible) precursor for the weakening of the regime. That is, avoiding potential regime disintegration, by getting ahead of a de-unity Russia?

Certainly because of United Russia's super-majority in the Duma, any weakening of the party threatens the rest of the political system. Looking at regional elections in September 2018, it is clear that the Kremlin learned from its mistakes, at some cost – there were protest votes for the Liberal Democratic Party and A Just Russia, not just for the Communist Party (which, significantly, is usually second to United Russia in



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every election). But the Kremlin was also forced to allow some people like Oleg Kozhemyako in Primorye to run as an ‘independent’ on the proviso that he essentially adhered to United Russia’s principles. This to me suggests that United Russia and the Kremlin have taken notice of the public’s discontent and the low popularity ratings of the party – even if these approval ratings need to be taken with a pinch of salt, it is relevant that the Kremlin is commissioning them from pliant polling agencies in the first place.

8. What makes Moscow’s focus on Far East regional development different this time?
Answered during discussion
9. There have been several recent examples of civic action on the local/regional level: people protesting over local issues like garbage dumps, etc. Do you see any influence of that on regional leaders and, perhaps, on the Kremlin?
Answered during discussion
10. Some argue Putin resets clock so can use constructive ambiguity around whether or he does run or not as a means to discipline his elite - keep them guessing and therefore restrict their room for manoeuvre. Given Putin can initiate selective prosecutions, demote and promote, redirect budgetary flows, does this explanation make sense? In other words, if Putin changes the constitution to allow him to run, then he is surely intent on running and winning unless his COVID performance and the duration (5 weeks, 5 months, 18 months?) derails his plans?
Answered in more detail below
11. For many years, there has been a lot of discussion of regional leadership positions as a proving ground for the future elite. But if you look at influential people in the center, there are only two that have come from outside Moscow and St. Petersburg -- Sobianin and Volodin. Do you see any indicators that this might change in the future? In other words, might this new generation of governors be something more than managers to implement central directives at the regional level?

Yes, I certainly believe that influential people can come from outside of Moscow/St Petersburg. The small inner circle of people that Putin trusts is shaped by his own personal contacts from his St Petersburg days, and that history and closeness to Putin is impossible to re-create. But that does not mean that newcomers cannot become influential over certain sectors, or certain briefs in government.

It is worth taking a deeper look at whether there are certain kinds of intuitions (such as universities) that are common to people who attain a greater level of seniority in Russian official structures. The variables I’d noticed were as I mentioned age, business backgrounds, and mayoral experience, but there are others too – in fact, many of the regional governors have studied the exact same degree course, a variation on ‘state and municipal management’, which can help us to identify relatively early on what kind of educational background might help propel a politician forward. While many of these newer governors may for now seem to be managing regional directives, if they perform these duties well, it could be a testing ground before ending up in Moscow – the ONF may play a role here in identifying



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these individuals as it strengthens its regional outreach ahead of the 2021 State Duma elections.

I would also note that coming from ‘Moscow’ or ‘St Petersburg’ does not necessarily mean being born in the city, but could mean attending a prestigious institute based in the city, or working there at a major firm. Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu for example is famously Tuvan, even though he has held other senior positions in Moscow and eventually moved there.

12. You mentioned that United Russia is very unpopular with the Russian population, but many people believe the feelings of the population do not matter since elections are not free or fair. Do you envision any scenario in the near future that would change this dynamic and give the population a true say in the election process? (answered with question below)
13. Is Putin really “popular” or does he just have a firm grip on power?

I will answer these two questions together, as they are linked. As briefly referred to above, how people answer polls in Russia is actually very interesting and revealing. Polls taken by state-controlled agencies like VTsIOM and FOM are usually ‘closed’ – so they offer a list of answers for people to choose from, rather than encouraging people to think of their own answers. The only independent agency, the Levada Center, has seen its activities increasingly curtailed by the government and has now been forced to register as a ‘foreign agent’ which increases state scrutiny over its operations.

All of this means that the options people can give, for how well they think the government/Putin is performing, are limited – they do not have the option of naming another politician that they think could do a better job, but must select from a given list. This, alongside state-controlled media that discredits and removes from view any viable opposition, means that polls about the government tend to reveal more about how well people have internalised the Kremlin’s media narrative, than what they really think about the government. Still, it is relevant that the Kremlin asks people these questions and commissions these polls in the first place, as evidently it is something the Kremlin thinks is important.

So those high approval ratings for Putin can reveal several things – people often tend to give answers to survey questions that they think the questioner wants to hear. Given that many people are likely to answer that they approve of Putin, many respondents are likely to claim that they do too. Putin could also just be genuinely popular, but this is not necessarily because of Russians’ personal adoration for him – it is likely to be a reflection of the success of the Kremlin’s ability to marginalize the opposition, and cast Putin as the only person in Russia that can solve people’s problems (take for example his Direct Line show). It is therefore no surprise that Russians have come to think of Putin as the first port of call to resolve local issues, rather than their councilor or their governor. In this sense it is worth comparing polling data of how well people rate their own regional governors (often poorly) against Putin.



HEADQUARTERS
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Yes, elections are not free/fair, but the government is aware they need to give people some (even if false) sense that they have a stake in Russia's political future. Often, turnout is much more important than the final results, which is why you will see the authorities refer to it constantly as a threshold for the elections to be seen as legitimate. Unfortunately I do not see any potential liberalisation of the political system that would allow elections to be entirely free of manipulation, as the Kremlin cannot risk this happening – after all, as Putin has repeatedly said, Russia has a democratic system, it is just different to a Western interpretation...

14. Is Putin's turn to younger regional leaders an indication that the established elite have become disenfranchised with Putin's leadership and policies?

I don't see any fracturing among the political elite – the most potentially dangerous oligarchs such as Igor Sechin that need to be kept happy, are being well taken care of (for example the recent assistance to Rosneft in Venezuela and the withdrawal from the OPEC oil deal). Many assumed that the Western sanctions would successfully drive a wedge between Putin and the oligarchs as competition grew for smaller and smaller chunks of key Russian businesses, but this has not been the case. Putin is likely turning to younger officials as part of this attempt to 'rebrand' United Russia and appeal to a younger voting demographic, especially because many of opposition activist Alexei Navalny's support base are young (school and university age) students. The Kremlin thinking is that promoting these younger governors will help to attract similar voters, and is not likely to suggest that the government is sidelining the old guard completely. Many of the older, most reliable leaders are still in power and retained their positions when the government rotated in January 2020 – people like Shoigu, Lavrov (despite his attempts to leave office) and Kolokoltsev still hold the most senior security positions, as they are staunch loyalists who Putin trusts.

15. How interested is the ONF in having the unpopular United Russia hijack their brand?

It is highly unlikely that the ONF has an independent say in whether they are absorbed by United Russia or not. The ONF consists of people who have personally worked hard to boost Putin's election campaigns since 2012, and so have a vested interest in ensuring that Putin approves of their activities. What a merger would do is increase the ONF's public profile (which has declined significantly since 2014), boost their funding, and also attract much more of Putin's attention, which is what much of the competition among agencies and institutions in Russia is about. This would also be a real political step up for many people in the ONF, despite the toxicity of the United Russia brand – it would be an opportunity to have proper impact on policy decisions, and some recognition that their work for Putin was being recognised.

16. What makes you believe Putin will step down in 2024?

Without trying to second guess Putin's personal views, there are three main reasons I think this. The first is Putin's lack of interest in his role in recent years – even before the COVID pandemic he rarely went to the Kremlin, and spent most of his time in his other property in Sochi, suggesting that he wished to be far removed from the centre of the political administration.



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The second is his unwillingness to tackle domestic issues – while he gives the impression of having absolute control over daily life in Russia, in reality he does not. The delegation of responsibility for dealing with the pandemic, one of the most serious challenges Russia has faced in recent times, is on the one hand an attempt to ensure Putin is not seen to introduce negative policies, but also an abdication of responsibility for this domestic situation. Putin is at his best as a statesman, when he is involved in Russia’s foreign policy, and he has never been particularly bothered by the mundanities of running his own country.

The third reason is practical. Putin will be 72 by 2024 which, notwithstanding his allegedly good health, is above the average life expectancy for a man in Russia. Although it has become a bit of a tradition for Soviet leaders to die in office, it is unlikely that Putin would want to follow this example, particularly given the health and personal problems that plagued figures such as Yeltsin and Brezhnev, and made their final years the source of numerous jokes.

While this may seem flippant, it is not intended as such. The ambiguity around his plans could also be less to do with design, and more a suggestion that Putin himself has not yet decided what he will do – which is also likely, as he changes his mind frequently. I could be proven wrong, but for now I’m not convinced that the constitutional amendments have actually changed anything about Putin’s plans, but just kept the door open so that he can decide nearer the time.

The Russia Strategic Initiative (RSI) is a U.S. Department of Defense organization that works with structures throughout the U.S. Government and with public and private think tanks around the world to develop a common understanding of Russian decision-making and way of war that supports the Coordinating Authority's integration that lead to integrated planning, assessments, and action recommendations.

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