



GOING TO THE PEOPLE —AND BACK AGAIN

**The Changing Shape
of the Russian Regime**

Alexander Baunov



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About the Author

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Before joining Carnegie, Baunov spent five years working as a senior editor at the independent news website *Slon.ru*, where he worked since its launch. Baunov has written on a wide variety of international and domestic topics, including modern Russian ideology, Russian foreign policy, Russia's place in the modern world, Ukraine, the European economic crisis, the Arab Spring, and the 2011–2012 Moscow protests.

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Summary

Revolutionary or dynamic regimes around the world tend to encourage supporters to act independently, or even engage in decentralized violence. By contrast, more conservative, static regimes typically discourage and distrust such unplanned, spontaneous demonstrations of support. For most of Russian history, the country's leaders have employed a top-down political system. When Crimea was annexed in 2014, the Kremlin temporarily allowed more decentralized patriotic activism to rally support, but they soon saw the potential risks and reverted to more centralized political control. Russia's reinstated traditional conservative rule may seem dull, but, paradoxically enough, its return might prove beneficial to future reformers.

Russia's Short-Lived Embrace of Patriotic Activism

- Starting in the early 2000s—and increasingly after the emergence of genuine public opposition rallies within Russia in 2011–2012 and following the annexation of Crimea in 2014—the Kremlin pushed back against critics by rallying pro-government grassroots support. In doing this, the Russian regime had to depart from its established conservative, hierarchical relationship with the people.
- Initially, the Russian government supported mostly patriotic youth organizations. When these groups proved ineffectual, the Kremlin turned to a broader array of state-sanctioned patriotic activists, who targeted perceived domestic enemies of Russia.
- Patriotic activism and amateur violence peaked during the 2013–2014 Maidan protests and the war in Eastern Ukraine. The Kremlin's reliance on hybrid warfare imposed limits on direct government participation and created a need for nationalistic volunteers.
- Although top Russian leaders did not orchestrate most of these patriotic activists' actions, the Russian government employed new laws and political rhetoric that stoked fear and legitimized the decentralized violence that occurred.

A Return to More Centralized Rule

- Russia's leaders have since realized that this uncoordinated grass-roots support does not fit with and may endanger their customary top-down style of rule. A dynamic relationship between rulers and supporters unnerves Russian bureaucrats—it requires maintaining communication with supporters, tolerating bottom-up initiatives, and competing with informal activists.
- The Russian regime still seeks to maintain its legitimacy through institutions. It is not interested in their destruction or the loss of its monopoly on force.
- The government appears to be curbing the popularity of pro-Russian volunteers active in Ukraine, who were excluded from the September 2016 State Duma elections.
- The Russian public seems to share the Kremlin's preferences. Citizens of conservative regimes often become afraid and confused when activists, not government officials, take up arms against enemies to defend national values.
- Dynamic regimes are often difficult to reform because both bureaucrats and citizens are in thrall to state ideology, whereas static conservative regimes may be more conducive to eventual reforms.

Introduction

A telling feature of any political regime is how it treats its own supporters. In some states, rulers require (or pretend they require) uncoordinated action and demonstrations of support from their base. In other countries, governments consider any unplanned political activity dangerous or detrimental, preferring to leave everything up to professionals. After a short-lived attempt at encouraging greater civilian activism after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia seems to be reverting to its traditional approach of caution and distrust toward nonstate political actors.

Compare this with the trial of Ukrainian fighter pilot Nadiya Savchenko, during which unknown Ukrainian patriots attacked the Russian embassy in Kiev and consulates in several Ukrainian cities in March 2016.¹ They set cars on fire, dented car hoods and bumpers, broke windows, and splattered walls and gates with paint and rotten eggs. Around the same time, several Ukrainian television channels just happened to mention on air the license plate number used to recognize Russian diplomats' cars. This information was a matter of public interest, the logic went, so why should it be concealed?

In response, two protests took place in Moscow outside the Ukrainian embassy. First, angry Russian youth imitated their Ukrainian counterparts and threw eggs at the building. However, the police set up barriers in advance, and not a single projectile hit its target.² Days later, demonstrators took part in a well-organized demonstration outside the embassy. Protesters carrying signs stood in formation and then dispersed in an orderly manner.³ There was no property damage. Nobody in Moscow informed these angry patriots how to distinguish Ukrainian diplomats from ordinary passersby. Back in Kiev, by contrast, groups of activists disseminated the personal information of journalists who had worked in the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR).⁴ In Russia, nothing of the sort happened to journalists who had covered the Ukrainian side of the front line.

This is not just a snapshot of differences between Russia and Ukraine—it's a more universal phenomenon that exists in countries around the world. For instance, after Saudi Arabia executed a Shia preacher in January 2016, outraged Iranian patriots vandalized the Saudi embassy in Tehran.⁵ But there were no violent protests in Riyadh in response. The Saudi government simply cut diplomatic ties with Iran and asked its diplomats to leave the Kingdom

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within forty-eight hours. The Iranians peacefully packed their bags and headed to the airport under police protection. Similarly, in December 2013, after Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited the controversial Yasukuni Shrine to Japan's war dead—including figures regarded as war criminals in both

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authoritarian China and democratic South Korea—groups of enraged patriots attacked Japanese diplomatic installations and businesses (in many cases, these were actually locally owned sushi bars).⁶

Unlike these cases, Russians seem less inclined to take such actions. At the peak of the Sino-Soviet conflict in the late 1960s, Soviet citizens never thought to lay hands on

the Peking Hotel, where Moscow urbanites continued to wash down Chinese delicacies with ginseng-infused vodka. It did not occur to the Russians to rename the hotel either. Similarly, today, nobody is thinking of renaming the Hotel Ukraine in Moscow. And, in 2008, after a short war in South Ossetia, no one considered renaming the two Moscow streets named after Georgia.

It might be tempting to consider violent protests a sign of great freedom and peaceful behavior a sign of great civility. But, in reality, these examples reflect two different types of relationships between a given government and its supporters—variations which are especially relevant for understanding authoritarian regimes: governments that require (or pretend to require) independent action from their supporters, and governments that view any unplanned activity as detrimental.

Except for a few short-lived revolutionary periods, Russia has largely stuck to the second style of rule—reserving political activity for government actors. Between about 2012 and 2015, Russia moved toward a more dynamic regime style—and then seemingly changed its mind and went back to a static, conservative model of governance. Despite this apparent recurrence of the status quo, Russia's return to its traditional relationship between ruler and ruled may turn out to be beneficial for future reformers.

The Practices of Static Versus Dynamic Regimes

Democracies and dictatorships take many forms: conservative, static governments as well as dynamic, revolutionary ones. In the first regime type, citizens express their support for the government through obedience and agreement. In the second, rulers act like the leaders of a people's revolt, renewing their extreme mandate over and over. In static regimes, the public is often quiet, yawning and listening. In dynamic ones, it whistles and applauds. Yells ring out from the crowd and, in the end, the orator may lead the masses outside to express their outrage in the streets. Dynamic regimes maintain their durability and

equilibrium by remaining in constant motion. The shining disc of power—so to speak—must spin wildly so as not to fall. But in static regimes, durability is maintained through absolute calm and a strict aversion to excess movement.

The key difference between these two types of authoritarian regimes can be seen in how they deal with pro-government, bottom-up initiatives. Dynamic regimes consider unplanned initiatives helpful, while static regimes are wary of them. The authorities in the latter case fear that self-initiated, supportive action might lower the threshold for all types of action. Who knows where that might lead? One day, a regime's supporters may condemn their government for not fully embodying the slogans they once endorsed. Someone will always be there to throw around blame or, worse, suggest a more consistent way of carrying out the government's ideology. And that's dangerous. These two types of regimes diverge on how much bottom-up activity to tolerate, and equally unfree citizens live significantly different lives under these respective kinds of governments.

This observation is not about dividing regimes into left- and right-leaning ideological camps, but rather sorting them by a set of practices. This framework divides governments by how they legitimize power and what type of relationship they maintain with supporters. To describe this difference, one can use the words revolutionary and conservative. However, the term conservative is too widely used to describe a set of ideas rather than practices. Similarly, the word revolutionary is frequently used in connection with a regime's origin (to signify that it took power through an uprising). It rarely is used to describe the *modus operandi* of a given government.

However, when this analysis talks about conservative regimes, it is referring specifically to conservative practices: everything is centralized and discipline is enforced. Those with authority make the decisions, while others follow orders and execute those decisions. By contrast, in revolutionary regimes, orders do not always come from the top; it's enough to have a framework of mutual understanding between rulers and supporters. Decisions are made and executed in a decentralized fashion, neither always from the pinnacle of power nor from the bottom.

In recent years, political scientists have been looking for more nuance beyond the limits of a democracy-authoritarianism dichotomy—and this may offer insights applicable to Russia's political landscape. Leah Gilbert and Payam Mohseni have written about hybrid regimes and electoral authoritarianism, suggesting that the main criterion for a free society is not a multiparty system, but competitive elections.⁷ However, according to this reasoning, one must conclude that Venezuela and, to some extent, Iran are relatively free. Other researchers, Carles Boix and Milan Svobik, write about the coexistence of authoritarianism and political institutions.⁸ It is rare for a dictator to control everything alone. Typically, he or she must delegate and divide power; those

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who acquire power subsequently build institutions to safeguard their interests. Sometimes, they go so far as to incorporate opposition parties into the regime structure.

Boix and Svobik are not alone in focusing on institutional and procedural elements of authoritarianism. Using examples from Eastern Europe, scholar Jason Brownlee suggests people should stop seeing authoritarianism as the condition of a state, and instead view it as a process.⁹ Authoritarian societies

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can oscillate in their degrees of freedom, even if they have ostensibly transitioned into democracies. Certain traits—such as exhibiting skepticism toward Europe and some international institutions, having alliances with authoritarian regimes, and directing nationalistic rhetoric toward neighboring countries—can be equally characteristic of authoritarian and democratic societies. Similarly, in a 2015 article, Ozan Varol describes “stealth authoritarianism” as when an authoritarian state uses democratic procedures for its own nondemocratic purposes.¹⁰ This type of authoritarian state consolidates power through formal processes. Paradoxically, this makes an authoritarian state more enduring, yet also makes it possible to view this authoritarianism as a transition toward democracy.

Ultimately, what most affects citizens' daily lives within a state and its economic and political relationships are not the values a ruling regime proclaims (whether traditional or progressive) or how the regime views itself (as a stronghold of conservatism or a vanguard of freedom and progress). Rather, how the state legitimizes its rule—by revolutionary or conservative means—and the kind of relationship—static or dynamic—it maintains with its supporters play the greatest roles.

Russia's History of Revolutionary Conservatism

Aside from a few revolutionary periods, examples of Russian rulers' resorting to decentralized, bottom-up activity among their supporters are few and far between. One remembers the pogroms that Orthodox monarchists carried out in the years before the 1917 revolution. In the late Soviet Union, young people from working-class suburbs disguised their desire to fight as an ideological struggle against their peers who compromised the Soviet social order: punks, rockers, metalheads, and latter-day hippies. The patriots were called Lyubers after an industrial Moscow suburb where a huge swath of low-income youth lived, and myths about their rightful proletarian roots and true patriotism persisted. An echo of this term can be heard now in the name of the band Lyube, a top Russian chanson act—a cocktail of patriotism, rock 'n' roll, and

romanticized criminality. Russian President Vladimir Putin has said publicly several times that he is a fan of the group.¹¹ The people who hold power in Russian society today grew up in this late Soviet era. Perhaps that's why their patriotic youth organizations tend to look like a strange mix of Lyubers and past patriotic Communist groups like the Pioneers or Komsomol.

Two amateur movements, the pro-czarist Black Hundreds of the early 1900s and the Lyubers of the late 1980s, appeared just when the existing political regimes, which they swore to protect, were overripe for collapse. Perhaps bottom-up action is a sign of impending demise or transformation. It's only logical that segments of a government's political base respond to decay with patriotic activism. Rulers cannot stop the spread of the negative societal forces driving this activism, and conservatives who want everything to remain the same have to take matters into their own hands and adopt revolutionary methods.

Neither the czarist nor the late Soviet regimes could quite figure out what to do with these uninvited supporters, and they adopted a position of nonresistance toward this helpful but reprehensible phenomenon. The rulers did not want to distance themselves from sincere backers. At the same time, they tried to control them by making connections with these organizations through the security services—a practice similar to how Russian authorities today try to work with nationalists and soccer hooligans.

Yet what these decadent empires really needed were not the ideologically restless, but a loyal and disciplined majority. It was the quiet termination of this loyalty that finished off these regimes, and no loyal activists could thwart their collapses.

Russia's Established Pattern of Static Rule

When the Russian regime encountered waves of protest—first during the Arab Spring, then on the streets of Moscow in 2011–2012, and finally in Kiev, it tried to counter these events by highlighting societal support for the government. To achieve this, the Russian government had to move away from its traditionally static and conservative relationship with the public. For a time, the Russian authorities tried to prescribe a more vigorous, active style of political behavior for themselves and their supporters—seeking to respond with their own revolutionary practices. However, recently there have been signs that Russia is abandoning its project of creating a dynamic regime.

Top-down order has extended through much of Russian society, in a wide range of areas including foreign policy, matters of religion, media coverage, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

When it comes to public figures, one can curse them, but only the government is allowed to punish them. If ordinary people attempt to take their own revenge, that constitutes a serious crime. For instance, those responsible for a 2005 assassination attempt on Anatoly Chubais received harsh sentences

even though Chubais, who spearheaded privatization efforts in the 1990s, is one of the main villains in the eyes of ultrapatriotic Russian nationalists. Likewise, in the autumn of 2014, while propagandists decried Russian rock musician Andrey Makarevich as a national traitor for performing in Ukraine, the Moscow City Court sentenced Oleg Mironov to three years in prison for letting his patriotism get the better of him and unleashing canisters of tear gas at a Makarevich concert.¹²

The Kremlin has made it plain that foreign policy issues, such as conflict with Turkey, should be left to the professionals in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Presidential Administration, and state media. There is no room for amateurs. During a February 2016 soccer match in Istanbul, FC Locomotiv Moscow midfielder Dmitry Tarasov removed his jersey to reveal a T-shirt depicting Putin in a garrison cap. This action was clearly intended to taunt Turkey amid a bitter political quarrel between the two countries. The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) soon filed a disciplinary complaint, and Tarasov's hometown club fined him 300,000 euros (about \$332,000).¹³ This was surprising because the club is owned by Russian Railways, which at the time was led by Vladimir Yakunin, who has aspired to be Russia's chief patriotic thinker.

Similarly, the Kremlin has made it clear that it's solely the government's job to determine when, where, and by whom the feelings of Russian Orthodox Christians are offended. In 2013, Russia passed a law that prohibits offending the feelings of religious believers.¹⁴ In 2015, Dmitry Tsorionov, head of the God's Will grassroots movement, attacked an exhibit of works by Soviet avant-garde artist Vadim Sidur at the Manezh Exhibition Center in Moscow, adjacent to the walls of the Kremlin. Tsorionov and his comrades knocked down sculptures they believed offensive to religious Christians. Tsorionov may have acted as an offended believer, but was still sentenced to ten days in jail for his actions. And later, his patron, Vsevolod Chaplin, was fired from his post as an influential figure in the Russian Orthodox Church.¹⁵

This pattern extends to broader aspects of Russian society as well. Pro-government activists from Stopkham (which translates to "stop boorishness")—a subgroup of a pro-government youth movement called Nashi—have long struggled against those who selfishly park on the sidewalks of Moscow and block pedestrian traffic.¹⁶ But, in 2016, the organization was liquidated at the request of the Ministry of Justice. Once again, the message was crystal clear: let the police deal with cynical motorists. Similarly, the government has broken up groups like the Occupy Pedophilia and Occupy Gerontophilia movements, which—under the guise of fighting pedophilia—entrap and attack sexual minorities and other ostensible enemies. Their goal, according to the group's neo-Nazi founder, was "to reveal the true face of liberalism."¹⁷ Russia's leadership may not love liberalism, but Occupy Pedophilia's leaders were nonetheless

sentenced to prison in 2013, the same year that the Duma ratified legislation against what was termed gay propaganda.¹⁸ The perpetrators were charged under a bill that prohibited “the incitement of hatred or enmity, as well as abasement of dignity of a person or a group of persons on the basis of sex, race, nationality, language, origin, attitude to religion, as well as affiliation to any social group,” including groups defined by sexual orientation.¹⁹ In May 2016, another neo-Nazi, Viacheslav Datsik, was charged with two criminal counts for his attacks on prostitutes in St. Petersburg brothels, which he committed in the name of public morality.²⁰

When it comes to media outlets, while people across Russia and around the world lamented the sudden firing of three leading RBC Group editors in May 2016, Russia’s ultrapatriotic population suffered its own loss.²¹ In spring 2016, *Izvestiya*—which was valued in patriotic circles for its sympathetic columnists—changed owners and its political line.²² The most vicious proponents of Novorossiia, who wanted a total break with the West and an unrelenting focus on battling internal enemies, disappeared from the opinion pages. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, for instance, had been one of *Izvestiya*’s prominent columnists. It was there that he published his famous article imploring his fellow citizens to stop playing nice with the “pack of hyenas” and to show no mercy for Russia’s enemies, a blatant echo of 1930s-era rhetoric.²³ To the Kremlin’s patriotic and nationalist critics, the day *Izvestiya* changed its leadership was a victory for the so-called fifth column of Russian national traitors. “Sadness for Russia. One of the few sources of light that had protected her territory from the encroachment of the dark night full of terrors is fogging over and fading,” wrote Egor Kolmogorov, one of the ex-columnists.²⁴

NGOs have also been affected. In April 2016, activists from the People’s Liberation Movement—a group connected to radical Duma deputy Evgeniy Fedorov—attacked the teenage winners of a historical essay contest about World War II organized by the Russian NGO Memorial.²⁵ They yelled obscenities and poured green disinfectant on the head of internationally acclaimed writer Lyudmila Ulitskaya, who was attending the ceremony. Memorial is one of the NGOs that the Russian government dislikes the most, and the unity of thought around the Soviet Union’s actions during World War II is one of the government’s most sacred goals. Still, Putin’s press secretary, Dmitri Peskov, vehemently condemned the assault. “This is hooliganism,” he said. “This is disgraceful. This is an example of people hiding themselves behind the St. George’s ribbon [a key symbol of Novorossiia] while discrediting it, although I doubt that such types can discredit it. But still, unquestionably, this is absolutely unacceptable.”²⁶

Despite these examples, there are times the Russian government pays precious little attention to attacks perpetrated against opposition figures. For instance, as of November 2016, there has been no criminal investigation

into a May 2016 attack by a group of Cossacks on anti-corruption crusader Alexei Navalny in Anapa.²⁷ Although the Russian authorities may threaten and punish their opponents, they are far from happy when others take on this work themselves.

Open Versus Closed Political Regimes

Generally speaking, conservative and revolutionary regimes, respectively, can also be termed hermetic (that is, sealed) or open in terms of their relationships to the public.

In hermetic, static regimes, the ruling bureaucracy is isolated from loyal citizens; it does not require co-authors for its official agendas. It prefers to receive passive support through obedience and order. In 1968—when China was beset by the Red Guards, the United States by anti-war protesters, and France by students—Soviet Secretary of Ideology A.P. Shaposhnikova was sincerely moved. “You read about these disgraces and smile to yourself. What a conscientious and disciplined citizenry we have!” she said.²⁸ Unlike hermetic ones, open regimes inhabit the same space as their supporters. The ruling bureaucracy and their cheerleaders are united in a common fight. This is reminiscent of Harry Truman’s characterization of the U.S. presidency as akin to “riding a tiger. A man has to keep on riding or be swallowed.”²⁹

The distinction between static, closed regimes and dynamic, open ones is apparent not only in comparisons of Russia and Ukraine or Saudi Arabia and Iran, but in other pairings as well. For instance—despite their similar ideologies, symbols, and holy Marxist scriptures—Communist China and the Soviet Union were quite different. The former’s Cultural-Revolution-era self-criticism struggle sessions and bottom-up purges of the Communist Party apparatus were the exact opposite of the Soviet Union, where purges were conducted from the top down and the people were only allowed to stand outside with a banner on occasion. “Total disorder under heaven leads to a universal order,” wrote then Chinese leader Mao Zedong in 1966. “This process repeats itself every seven or eight years. . . . Seven or eight years will pass and again we will raise the movement to sweep out the refuse: we will have to sweep it out many times in the future.”³⁰ The main instrument for cleaning—the “chaos” leading to “order”—was the base of the Chinese Communist Party under Mao. This notion was foreign to the mature Soviet Union and is unfamiliar to modern Russia.

This contrast between closed, top-down political regimes and open, bottom-up ones is evident in many parts of the world, and it includes both socialist and anti-socialist governments. When Fidel Castro began to copy the conservative Soviet model, Che Guevara fled Cuba in 1965 out of boredom. But he may not have fled Hugo Chavez’s Venezuela of the 2000s, where the state tried to renew its revolutionary mandate with every election and referendum.

Chavez's government constantly riled up its supporters and kept the cycle of chaos going. Not unlike Castro's Cuba, Josip Broz Tito's Yugoslavia was a classic example of a static, conservative society. The Marshal presided over the state from the early 1950s until 1980, his main achievement being his victory over German fascism. By comparison, Slobodan Milošević's Serbia and Franjo Tuđman's Croatia in the 1990s seemed almost democratic because they constantly appealed to the people's sense of homeland and justice and led boisterous masses of their fellow citizens in the direction that the people wanted.

This same colorful dichotomy was present among anti-Marxist regimes in Southern Europe as well. For example, the practices and rhetoric of Benito Mussolini in Italy from the early 1920s to the early 1940s were dynamic and revolutionary. His greatest critic, the socialist Giacomo Matteotti was murdered for his socialist background—likely by fascist activists without Il Duce's knowledge—amid the rising wave of anti-bourgeois sentiment sweeping the developing countries of Europe. On the other hand, after the end of Spain's civil war in 1939, Francisco Franco built a fully centralized nation, conservative in ideology and practice. Although he moved from economic statism toward a market economy and somewhat liberalized the private sector in the 1960s, he didn't loosen a single screw in the political system.

In South America, Chile's Augusto Pinochet was the opposite of Argentina's Juan Peron in many respects. The former maintained tight military command and a single economic and foreign policy from the start of his rule to the very end, whereas the latter changed programs over time. Sometimes Peron was against the Catholic Church or the United States, and sometimes he was for them. He seemed to value movement and activity above all else, constantly involving the people in new campaigns, assembling gigantic rallies, holding marches, and organizing massive aid programs—anything to keep his supporters and himself in a state of revolutionary fervor.

Meanwhile in Southeast Asia, Vietnamese Communists were busy building bureaucratic socialism with the help of the Soviet Union, whereas the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia used bands of teenagers to realize their goals. The Khmer Rouge killed their fellow Cambodians with improvised weapons and mob muscle. While familiar faces of the party and the nomenklatura governed social life in Vietnam, the Khmers insisted that they had no leaders, only revolutionary equality. Their actual dictatorship remained anonymous for quite a long time. The people were only dimly aware of a central committee that consisted of Brother One, Brother Two, Brother Three, and so on. These two neighboring Communist peers (Saigon and Phnom Penh were captured in quick succession in April 1975) turned out to be so different that, only four years after the two states were founded, the Vietnamese overthrew their Cambodian allies, worried that the Khmer Rouge were compromising socialism as an ideology. The

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practices that divided them turned out to be stronger than the theories and symbols that united them.

Static and dynamic regimes differ in how they view time. In static regimes, the legitimization of the state relies almost exclusively on the past: the founding fathers remain sacred and must be celebrated with appropriate rituals. Even if the sacred event was a revolution, that was all in the past. What matters now is continuous succession. In dynamic regimes, the legitimization continues to happen as a live event. It is as if such governments need to relive the sacral event in the present: for them, the revolution is here and it is permanent.

Russia's Period of More Dynamic Rule

For Russia, a temporary shift from a static to a more dynamic regime began in the early 2000s.

During the color revolutions early in his rule, Putin made serious attempts to defend Russia's political system with the help of informal patriotic groups.

In the 1990s, most Russians were shocked by their country's dramatic decline on the international stage, and this helped create an eager constituency for patriotic, anti-Western rhetoric. However, for a time, the state refrained from taking part in any of this, leaving it up to the parliament and the radical opposition. This changed in the early 2000s, after the color revolutions and the rise of Eduard Limonov's National Bolshevik Party, when the Kremlin finally saw the light and decided to create its own youth organizations. Events in Beirut, Belgrade, Bishkek, Kiev, and Tbilisi confirmed the Presidential Administration's suspicions that outside (that is, U.S.) forces were trying to

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change unfavorable regimes through a standard strategy of inciting opposition politicians and youthful anti-regime activists in the streets.

The authorities decided that Russia must thwart these tactics by organizing patriotic youth for street demonstrations and bolstering their numbers with people who had no other way to spend their time. This led to the advent of organizations like Nashi, United Russia's Molodaya

Gvardiya (Young Guards) and others. Nashi grew out of the group Walking Together, which formed in 2000. In capitalist Russia, the authorities have been trying to create something like the Komsomol of the Soviet era. New patriotic youth groups are still being formed. In late May 2016, popular Defense Minister Sergei Shoygu formally launched the Yunarmiya (Youth Army), which is being run out of his ministry.³¹

Russian patriotic movements generally have had two main modi operandi: mass rallies to show strength and actions by small groups of activists to demonstrate resolve. The first mimics a mass exodus of the unsatisfied onto the streets (while also acting as a counterweight to the actual critics of the regime). The

second is the Russian response to foreign oppositional activism of a patriotic or radical nature, such as Ukrainian patriots in Kiev who have attacked pro-Russian politicians and journalists in recent years.³²

This model fits into the government's typical response to challenges—any opponents are confronted with their own mirror image. In every situation, Russia must show its opponents that everything they do Russia will do as well. Anything else would be a display of weakness.

Long before Russia's current anti-Western foreign policy and the domestic struggle for morality at home, Walking Together drew attention to Western offenses against Russian citizens, internal enemies, and contemporary artists' harmful influence on society. These were the predecessors of post-Crimea pro-Kremlin activists. These early Walking Together demonstrators protested outside the French embassy in support of Russian actress Natalia Zakharova after a custody battle with her French ex-husband in 2000.³³ They gathered outside the U.S. embassy in defense of Pavel Borodin, a top Kremlin bureaucrat arrested in New York City on corruption charges in 2001.³⁴ They demonstratively disposed of books by talented, well-known Russian authors like Viktor Pelevin and Vladimir Sorokin—books with controversial content that conservative readers found offensive. Before the 2003 Duma elections, they hung a banner on the side of the Hotel Moscow, depicting Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov, who at the time was still a threat to the government, next to oligarch Boris Berezovsky, whom the government was already persecuting.³⁵

The first mass gathering under Putin in May 2001 looked fairly traditional. On the day of the presidential inauguration, a few thousand young people lined up along St. Basil's Slope in the middle of Moscow with blue T-shirts that read, "All Is Well." (In Russian, this phrase, *use putem*, is a pun on Putin's name.)³⁶ The participants received a small monetary reward, and those from out of town got the opportunity to visit Moscow. Leaders of the group were given free pagers for communication. At this point, college students and older high-schoolers from lower-class Moscow suburbs still formed the backbone of centrally controlled, pro-Kremlin organizations.³⁷

This difference between small and large protests characterizes pro-Kremlin actions to this day. Small events, which involve only activists, tend to be much more lively and radical than large ones, which require gathering extra participants from the broader population. This is only natural, since bringing out large masses of people in support of the government in static, conservative regimes is an almost impossible task.

Time has seemed to show that the slogans of pro-Kremlin youth organizations anticipated future pro-government propaganda. Although their activities were regulated from the top down, their groups were a testing ground for ideas

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and methods that later became official practice. Even though the groups were controlled from above, they influenced the ruling bureaucracy. The bureaucrats had to enter an unspoken competition with their own more radical spawn.

Identifying the Enemy

During Putin's first presidency from 2000 to 2008, groups like Nashi and Molodaya Gvardiya sought to support the Russian government. During these early years, these Russian groups took on a so-called antifascist orientation, although they remained under tight central control and rarely resorted to violence.

The group Nashi appeared after the first Kiev Maidan in 2004 and 2005. It was composed of Walking Together and several other smaller organizations. Vasily Yakemenko, the head of Walking Together, was put in charge, and the Kremlin's idea man, Vladislav Surkov, oversaw the new organization. Not much changed about the activities of the movement, but a new element was introduced: although nobody had used the word fascist to describe the first Ukrainian Maidan protesters—as would later happen during the Euromaidan demonstrations—Nashi was dubbed an antifascist organization. This, in some sense, turned all of its opponents into fascists overnight. Antifascism later became one of the main devices of the regime's new ideology. Russia is the country that defeated fascism in 1945, the logic went, so those who oppose or criticize Russia must be facilitators of fascism.

In 2007, Nashi held a series of demonstrations, branded antifascist, in Russia and Estonia, protesting the removal of a statue of a Soviet soldier from the Estonian capital of Tallinn.³⁸ Protesters in Moscow barricaded the Estonian embassy and tailed the ambassador's car. That same year, Nashi took it upon themselves to harass then British ambassador to Russia Tony Brenton for his appearance at the Other Russia Forum and his promise to help Russian NGOs.³⁹ Nashi described its actions as antifascist; after all, Brenton seemed to consider Russians to be savages that the West must civilize, the same way Hitler considered them *untersmenschen*. The group also targeted members of the Russian opposition and human rights activists.

All of Nashi's actions displayed one key difference from contemporary bottom-up activism: they were not violent. Despite all its rhetoric, the group did very little actual damage to people or property.

Molodaya Gvardiya acted as the ideological ally of Nashi and sometimes competed with it for the Kremlin's resources. Their enemies, ideologies, and methods were similar, so the two quarreled about which should receive approval, financial support, and television spots. The Presidential Administration controlled the Molodaya Gvardiya indirectly, working through United Russia and its local organizations. Nashi took its orders directly from the Presidential

Groups like Nashi and Molodaya Gvardiya . . . took on a so-called antifascist orientation, although they remained under tight central control and rarely resorted to violence.

Administration, which is why it failed to survive the departure of its Kremlin supervisor, Vladislav Surkov, whereas *Molodaya Gvardiya* still exists today.

The media immediately began to compare *Walking Together* and *Nashi*, not only to the *Komsomol*, but also to the Hitler Youth and the Red Guards of Maoist China. However, none of these were precise comparisons. Unlike the German and Soviet groups, membership in *Nashi* did not become obligatory for all young people, let alone a prerequisite to secure a decent education and subsequent career. Many people succeeded who had no ties to the new youth movement. A person could achieve political, administrative, or corporate success without any such connections. Former youth activists do not dominate Russia's highest economic and political posts. This suggests that Russia has a conservative style of regime, in which careers are made not due to political activism, but through personal connections and professional skills.

Nashi differed from Mao's Red Guards in other ways too—the shock troops of the Chinese Cultural Revolution were much more independent and disobedient, but also they targeted representatives of the government, universities, and leadership figures from the ruling party. During its lifetime, *Nashi* almost never attacked members of the ruling class, although later on, Putin actually tried to encourage this tactic through an organization for adults, the All-Russia People's Front. But even these gambits were carried out very carefully, infrequently, and with close direction from above.

The Art of Correcting Mistakes

Somehow, the Kremlin's best-laid plans for a youthful counterassault on its opponents sputtered. In the winter of 2011–2012, when anti-Putin rallies took place, these groups' leaders failed to produce the tens of thousands of young patriots they had promised. The state had to quickly clean up the mess and find other methods for organizing their rallies.

Nashi was officially disbanded in 2013, after its Kremlin supervisor, Surkov, left his post as the first deputy prime minister of Putin's Presidential Administration. While the idea of mobilizing loyal youth did not completely disappear, the period of pro-Kremlin youth activism had ended. Starting with the Bolotnaya Square protests and in the subsequent crises in Crimea and the Donbas, the state began to rely on adult activists—military volunteers and veterans, Cossacks, bikers, anti-Maidanists, and factory workers, not to mention Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov's cheerleaders. These groups had an older median age than the Kremlin's boy scouts and girl scouts.

The first pro-government rally in response to the 2011 Moscow street protests was held in Manezhnaya Square in honor of Constitution Day on December 12. After the first anti-government Bolotnaya Square protest on December 10—in which tens of thousands of people participated according to official estimates—United Russia was able to mobilize no more than 5,000 to 7,000 supporters.⁴⁰ The rally confirmed the worst stereotypes about the

proceedings—identical pre-written banners were handed out to state sector employees and senior citizens; Central Asian migrant workers were bused in for the occasion. After registering with the authorities, many of these people simply left. All the same, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Rogozin gave a speech. Rogozin, incidentally, had just returned to Moscow after completing a stint as Russia’s ambassador to NATO and was one of the few top bureaucrats who actually had experience with street protest politics. He brought the remnants of

Gradually, the government organizers learned another trick. They shifted the focus of the rallies from being for the Kremlin to being against the state’s opponents.

his organization, the Congress of Russian Communities, along with him and criticized both the opposition and the state with a bevy of nationalistic slogans.

The state and the opposition began to compete over who could organize better rallies. The Kremlin continued to bus in state sector workers, and each effort proved better than the last. Informal opposition rallies were juxtaposed with informal pro-Putin rallies, which were organized not

by the Kremlin but by other nationalist groups, like the little-known collective Essence of Time, the Patriots of Russia Party, or Rogozin’s Congress of Russian Communities.⁴¹ Of course, without the Kremlin’s bureaucratic resources they never would have been able to mobilize approximately 100,000 supporters as they did in February 2012, when pro-government groups held an anti-Orange rally (a direct reference to Ukraine’s color revolution in 2004) on Poklonnaya Hill in Moscow.⁴² And over time, the crowds became more lively, the slogans grew less formal, and some volunteer participants joined the ranks.

Gradually, the government organizers learned another trick. They shifted the focus of the rallies from being for the Kremlin to being against the state’s opponents. The slogans and speeches turned out best when they condemned opposition protesters. The populations of conservative regimes generally expect the authorities to overcome troubles on their own, without involving the people. It seems best, rather, to mobilize support in opposition to a perceived enemy. The crowd’s loyalist activities tend to become more sincere if they are turned into a form of protest. The Russian leadership started to take this into account when it organized all subsequent rallies: the people rally better against others than for the government.

Based on polling data, it seems that citizens are about as unlikely to take to the streets for the cause of the unpopular opposition as they are to show their support for Russia’s ultra-popular president. According to an April 2016 Levada Center survey, only 17 percent of Russian citizens surveyed were willing to participate in a mass demonstration in support of the policies of the president or the government.⁴³ Meanwhile, 73 percent said they would avoid such an event. At the time, 82 percent of Russians approved of Putin’s performance as president and 54 percent approved of Dmitry Medvedev’s performance as prime minister, according to Levada Center data.⁴⁴ According to this same April 2016 study, 11 percent would be willing to participate in a

demonstration of protest against the economic and social policies of the current regime, whereas 79 percent would not attend.

Meanwhile, a July 2016 Public Opinion Foundation survey found that, between the start of 2015 and the middle of 2016, the percentage of Russians willing to attend an opposition rally fluctuated between 3 and 7 percent, and those willing to attend a rally at the behest of the government was somewhere between 5 and 10 percent.⁴⁵ It appears that the number of people willing to go to an anti-government rally (3–7 percent) was roughly the same as the number of people who said they would be willing to speak out against the government if they didn't have to go anywhere (4–6 percent). On the other hand, many more people were willing to speak out in support of the state (17–23 percent) than people willing to march on its behalf (again, 5–10 percent). This is a typical picture for a static regime—citizens assume they are required to agree, but not necessarily to participate.

This correlation has been relatively constant. In 2012, when the regime began responding to opposition rallies with rallies of its own, 23 percent of Russians said they would come out to support the government, 45 percent said they would not, and 19 percent said they would if Putin himself spoke at the rally, according to a February 2012 Public Opinion Foundation survey.⁴⁶ This shows that, at the time, the rulers were striving to increase their support in the streets, energize their followers, and add in some revolutionary dynamism. Between 2012 and 2015, 4 percent more people participated in rallies in general.⁴⁷ This was due, mostly, to an increased number of pro-government demonstrators—in 2012, 1 percent of Russians participated, but by 2015 it was 10 percent.⁴⁸ In the same three years between the Bolotnaya Square rallies and the Donbas conflict, the percentage of people who said they would be willing to attend a pro-state demonstration increased: in 2015, this number was six times higher than in 2012, and it included new categories of citizens and age groups.⁴⁹

Religious Conservatism and an Emerging Threat of Violence

By using large, pro-government rallies, the state tried to create a rising tide of public support amid hard times. It tried to make Russian authoritarianism more dynamic, but also opened the door to greater animosity toward perceived opponents of the state and even violence.

Public energy was harnessed for the struggle against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community and against then U.S. ambassador Michael McFaul. They were the main public enemies even before the Maidan demonstrations of 2013 and 2014 in Kiev. As events unfolded in the Donbas, the Russian regime reached its peak of uncharacteristic dynamism and revolutionary activity.

Generally speaking, public support is more important for a populist, dynamic regime than for an elite-oriented, conservative one. In Russia, the

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rulers found that expressing support for a set of values—including anti-Westernism, moral conservatism, and Orthodox Christianity—guaranteed their popularity. When assembling a values-based platform, the government may have been influenced by the impressive turnout to see Orthodox holy relics. In recent years, thousands of average Russians have waited in line for twenty-four

hours to see relics like the St. Panteleimon Hallows, a piece of the cross, and the Virgin Mary’s belt.⁵⁰ (The belt arrived late in the fall of 2011, on the very eve of the protests.)

The authorities concluded that religiously tinged conservatism tapped into the prevailing mood among the majority of ordinary Russians. Promoting laws that pleased them and punished the angry urbanites who turned out for the street demonstrations in 2011–2012 was a winning formula. Levada Center surveys from this period showed

strong support for a series of restrictive laws the Duma adopted in 2013. The laws affirmed the unity of the people and state over the elites. For example, when an October 2013 Levada Center survey asked about a law forbidding what was deemed propaganda pertaining to nontraditional relationships, 42 percent of respondents were unequivocally in favor, 25 percent were partially in favor, and 7 percent were opposed.⁵¹ The public showed similar support for laws protecting the feelings of believers: 27 percent unequivocally in favor, 28 percent partially in favor, and 9 percent opposed. Likewise, laws aimed at labeling NGOs as foreign agents were supported unequivocally by 14 percent, partially by 21 percent, and opposed by only 8 percent.

Pro-government activists used these laws to identify new enemies, rallying against the LGBT community, supposedly obscene artists, NGOs, and opposition politicians. Activities were not always coordinated from the top, especially not from the very top. But the new laws and the rhetoric of Duma deputies and pro-government propagandists created a group of legitimate targets for decentralized violence by patriotic and religious activists.

Around the time of the 2011–2012 protests in Moscow, Putin gave a clear signal in favor of amateur violence. During an annual televised question-and-answer marathon session with then prime minister Putin, Igor Kholmanskikh, a foreman from the Uralvagonzavod machine-building factory, suggested circumventing the government’s monopoly on violence and dissuading the protesters by using revolutionary methods, saying: “If our militia, or as it’s now called, our police, doesn’t know how to work and can’t deal with things, then me and the boys are ready to go out by ourselves and stand up for our stability . . . within the boundaries of the law, of course.” Putin reacted agreeably. “Come on over,” he said with a smile, which triggered an explosion of laughter from the audience, “but not right now.”⁵² In May 2012, Putin appointed Kholmanskikh the presidential representative to the Ural Federal District.⁵³ Igor may not have ended up coming over with “the boys,” but everyone noted

that the threat of amateur violence was being sanctioned at the highest level and even leading to career advancement.

The usual breaking up of gay pride demonstrations was complemented by attacks on gay clubs and assaults on members of the LGBT community and activists. After Pussy Riot staged an anti-regime performance in a Russian Orthodox cathedral in February 2012, religious activists started feeling justified to go anywhere. Previously rare attacks on art exhibitions, plays, and historic buildings that are perceived to be sacrilegious now occur one after another.⁵⁴

A related new trend developed, too: an aggressive fight against NGOs and opposition politicians. The worst thing was the shocking murder of Boris Nemtsov on February 27, 2015. But even this shocking event failed to put an end to a series of threats against and physical attacks on members of the so-called fifth column, including former prime minister Mikhail Kasyanov, Alexei Navalny, and even the youthful participants in Memorial's historical essay competition.

Regardless of these trends, the state is not engaging in systematic persecution against any of these groups. LGBT clubs, contemporary art venues, and avant-garde theaters are still in business and very numerous, despite setbacks. Opposition politicians and human rights advocates face the most pressure, but even they still have enough space to work freely—a common feature of hybrid or stealth authoritarian systems.

Volunteers and Hybrid War

The Maidan protests of 2013–2014 and the early phase of the war in eastern Ukraine marked the high point of patriotic activism and decentralized violence. The Russian government needed volunteers for their hybrid war, which required recruiters, informal armed groups, and logistics and propaganda experts. To pass off the military action as spontaneous and homegrown, the state needed to publicize and praise the actions of the volunteers. Yet eventually these unchanneled actions became difficult for the Kremlin to manage and began to pose a challenge to its authority.

At this time, Russia was a country of camouflage-clad heroes who, in the eyes of many regular folk, differed from the bureaucrats in suits and ties because they were willing to clearly say things that the state's representatives could not (or would not) admit. It was a time of huge surges in patriotic military clubs, military history clubs, bloggers, government-sponsored NGOs, and strongmen (volunteers, Cossacks, and pro-Russian fighters). It was a time of new symbols and rituals, including Russian imperial flags, paramilitary and Cossack iconography, and logos that combined Soviet, nationalist, and Orthodox elements. It was a time of radical slogans.

By lionizing the heroes of Crimea and the people's republics—namely, self-proclaimed DNR Defense Minister Igor Strelkov Girkin, DNR leader

The Maidan protests of 2013–2014 and the early phase of the war in eastern Ukraine marked the high point of patriotic activism and decentralized violence.

Aleksandr Zakharchenko, and Lugansk People's Republic (LNR) leader Igor Plotnitsky—the state embraced autonomy and independence. This affected Ukrainian leaders—against whom Crimea and the Donbas had rebelled—but also Russian ones. A separatist, by definition, does not obey the state and is autonomous and informal, but is also willing to lend his or her support in exchange for having the freedom of initiative.

Two segments from the television station NTV show the change in the amount of leeway given to pro-government activists. The first was filmed in 2013, during the height of the campaign against what was characterized as gay propaganda—it documented an attack on a gay nightclub.⁵⁵ The tone of the segment is neutral, the attackers do not get to say much (they're wearing masks), and the victims are allowed to tell their version of the events. Neither side gets much obvious approval from the network. This is strikingly different from a segment called “Cossacks Threaten Human Rights Activists Helping the Euromaidan,” which was broadcast one year later in the winter of 2014, toward the end of the Maidan demonstrations in Kiev.⁵⁶ It is an ode to amateur violence. People in paramilitary garb—wearing crosses and Slavic ligature—overturn chairs and computers, put bags on the heads of the workers of a consumer rights advocacy group, and threaten them because they are supposedly helping the fascists on the Maidan. Wearing no masks to conceal their identities and standing directly in front of the camera, the attackers read a threatening manifesto.

After the Euromaidan, a wide variety of amateur armed patriots in masks and camouflage replaced high-ranking officials as the celebrities of the Russian public. Unlike most government officials and military officers, these men were known not by their real names, but by various noms de guerre and nicknames. The main heroes of 2015 were Batman, Motorola, Givi, and Strelkov (the last of which means shooter in Russian). These names were not unlike nicknames adopted in the revolutionary underground. Somehow a period of dynamic experiments in Russia conjures up revolutionary archetypes.

A plethora of organizations facilitated the hybrid war. They enlisted volunteers, outfitted them, and transported them to the conflict zones. But their activities were not highlighted in official media outlets, which decided to paint a different picture. They claimed that the fighting was mostly between locals and a few concerned Russians, each of whom had come to the region when they heard about the aggressors' atrocities and the suffering of the people there. This was, to put it mildly, factually inaccurate since it left out the part about how they got there and the help they received from numerous organizations along the way. The logistics of a volunteer war require horizontal connections between large numbers of radical patriots. These connections cannot be totally controlled by the bureaucracy.

Various foundations, websites, and social networking groups made the logistics of hybrid warfare possible. Take, for example, the Foundation for

Assistance to Novorossia, From the People to Donbas, or the St. Basil the Great Foundation, which was started by the businessman and Orthodox ideologue Konstantin Malofeev. Then, there was the Tikhon the Enlightener Foundation, the Alliance of Donbas Citizens, the Association of Novorossia, and the Save the Donbas Foundation, as well as regional organizations such as Altai Donbas, the Afghanistan and Chechnya Veterans' Alliance, websites such as Dobrovolc.org (which translates to volunteer.org), and various Cossack organizations.⁵⁷

All of these groups collaborated with regional governments and field commanders to send ammunition, medicine, money, clothing, and building materials into the Donbas. Some focused on enlisting volunteers, shipping them into the combat zones and, if necessary, paying for their removal and hospitalization. A previous page on the website Dobrovolc.org that is no longer accessible thanked donors for helping transfer soldiers to the front lines and even offered the chance to fill out an application form.⁵⁸ Returning warriors have also started their own groups, like the Union of Veterans of the Donbas Militia or the Union of Donbas Volunteers. (One suspects that the latter organization may be part of a Kremlin attempt to coax ex-volunteers away from the harmful influence of loose cannons like Girkin.)

During the formative stages of the crisis in the Donbas, a radical and vociferous worldview temporarily broke through the uppermost ranks of Russia's staunchly conservative leadership. The tiger, which bore the seemingly confident rider, had suddenly reared his head.

The Donbas has not been the only place where one has been able to see the breakdown of Russian static rule and the state's monopoly on violence. In Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov has convened huge rallies that at first defended the Muslim faith from blasphemous Europe, then defended the leader's honor from the liberal media and other traitors. This was accompanied, in due course, by public campaigns under the slogan "Ramzan Don't Go."⁵⁹ These performances were meant as a show to intimidate and to give food for thought to the Kremlin. Other examples include threats against Moscow-based journalists and politicians issued by both the Chechen leader and ostensibly Ramzan's ordinary supporters, the murder of Boris Nemtsov, and beatings of human rights activists affiliated with Putin's Presidential Council on Civil Society and Human Rights at the hands of anonymous Chechen patriots.⁶⁰

All of these incidents indicated a breaking of the state's traditional monopoly on violence—and served as a helpful reminder of what a dynamic dictatorship actually looks like. Kadyrov also offered to pay soccer player Dmitry Tarasov's fine for the unsanctioned display of a Putin T-shirt at the match in Istanbul and, for good measure, the Chechen leader even invited him to play for a Grozny-based team, Terek.⁶¹ The indirect critique of the central government's passivity was unmistakable. From the standpoint of a truly dynamic regime, supporters should have been behaving exactly like Tarasov.

Reining in the Masses

Before long, the Russian authorities realized that this revolutionary style of support from below does not quite fit with Russia's national traditions and its customary style of governing. The dynamic relationship with the regime's subjects made the ruling elites feel rather uncomfortable and threatened. The new state of affairs required Russian political elites to maintain ongoing communication with supporters, tolerate independently organized initiatives, and even countenance cooperation and competition on the part of informal leaders.

The war in the Donbas, with its ragtag, disorderly volunteers, eventually gave way to the war in Syria, which is fully controlled by the Ministry of Defense (MOD). The MOD learned a tough lesson from the July 2014 crash of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 about the downsides of not maintaining close supervision over advanced military technologies. Operations in Syria are a government-led affair, and Russia's armed forces are front and center. The conflict's heroes are not miners-cum-militants or goodwill volunteers pouring into a foreign country from across Russia; rather, they are special forces, educated in military academies, who are just cogs in the official Russian military chain of command.

This has been a wise move. The rulers have realized that, except for a few select episodes, the real threats to the current Russian regime have never been liberal elements, but the forces of the far left and conservative patriots and nationalists. These are people who want a clean break with the global economy, to punish Russia's internal enemies, to fully regulate culture and private life, and to readjudicate basic things like the allocation of property and wealth that resulted from privatization in the 1990s. In the tumultuous DNR and LNR,

such ideas were constantly and actively discussed, and initial steps were taken to put them into practice.

The loyalty of volunteers was also far from a given. They were unequivocally loyal to the Russian state as long as the two pursued the same goals. But when the intentions of the activists have diverged with those of the regime, activity has remained and loyalty has disappeared. In June 2016, the All-Russian National Movement, under the

direction of Igor Strelkov Girkin, released a defiant statement: "We believe that the current Russian order is doomed in the historical perspective. We refuse to grant the current regime our support."⁶² (Not dissimilarly, the Ukrainian government finds it difficult to incorporate the heroes of the Donbas into its political system.)

Consequently, Russia has started curbing volunteer activity—dissolving the groups of Cossacks in the people's republics and disciplining volunteers and activists. During the conflict in Ukraine, new heroes ascended to the heights of fame as quickly as the elevator climbs to the observation deck of Moscow's

Before long, the Russian authorities realized that this revolutionary style of support from below does not quite fit with Russia's national traditions and its customary style of governing.

Ostankino TV Tower. Now, they slowly disappeared from the television screen. Those who haven't fully disappeared (such as Zakharchenko and Plotnitsky) are kept around largely for use in newsreels about the endless peace negotiations and for the sake of the Minsk II Protocol. Separatist leader Alexei Chaly lost a diplomatic fight in Crimea to Sergey Aksyonov and other politicians who want to fully integrate themselves into the Russian bureaucracy. Chaly is still a hero of the pro-Russian unrest in post-Maidan Ukraine, but is no longer the speaker of the Sevastopol parliament.

Some state employees radicalized under the influence of informal activists and went further in their words than before. High-ranking bureaucrats accomplish two things when they give radical performances—such as Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky's outbursts or an April 2016 article written by the head of the Investigative Committee, Alexander Bastrykin.⁶³ First, they want to scare independent-minded citizens and portray the president as a guarantor of moderation. Second, they are trying to address the guarantor himself—saying in effect that they have adopted the most extreme positions, and that the system needs them to energize its most active supporters and compete with informal leaders who have convictions similar to their own.

Data collected by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM) in March 2015 shows that 65 percent of Russian citizens at that time sympathized with the volunteers fighting in Donbas.⁶⁴ Their popularity could have posed a problem for the bureaucrats if the volunteers, under the right circumstances, had become players in domestic politics. They could have initiated a switch from static, conservative authoritarianism to a style of decentralized violence common in dynamic regimes like the early people's republics as well as post-revolutionary Ukraine.

It now appears that the Russian government is consciously trying to curb the popularity of its volunteer activists. The volunteers, first peaceful and later violent, received most of their media attention during the spring and summer of 2014, and the media continued to cover them until the winter of 2015, around the signing of the Minsk II Protocol. At that time, there was no direct criticism or reframing of the volunteer movement or Novorossia. But as the government began disciplining the DNR and the LNR, the media began moving stories about volunteers into the background.

Some of the heroes of Novorossia returned to their motherland after being given something of an ultimatum by the Moscow-appointed supervisors (or *kuratory*) of the separatist republics. The Donbas region craved order, and the volunteers were preventing Russia from withdrawing, which impeded negotiations with the West. Former DNR premier Alexander Borodai admitted that there was a "collective decision to remove Strelkov from the Donbas

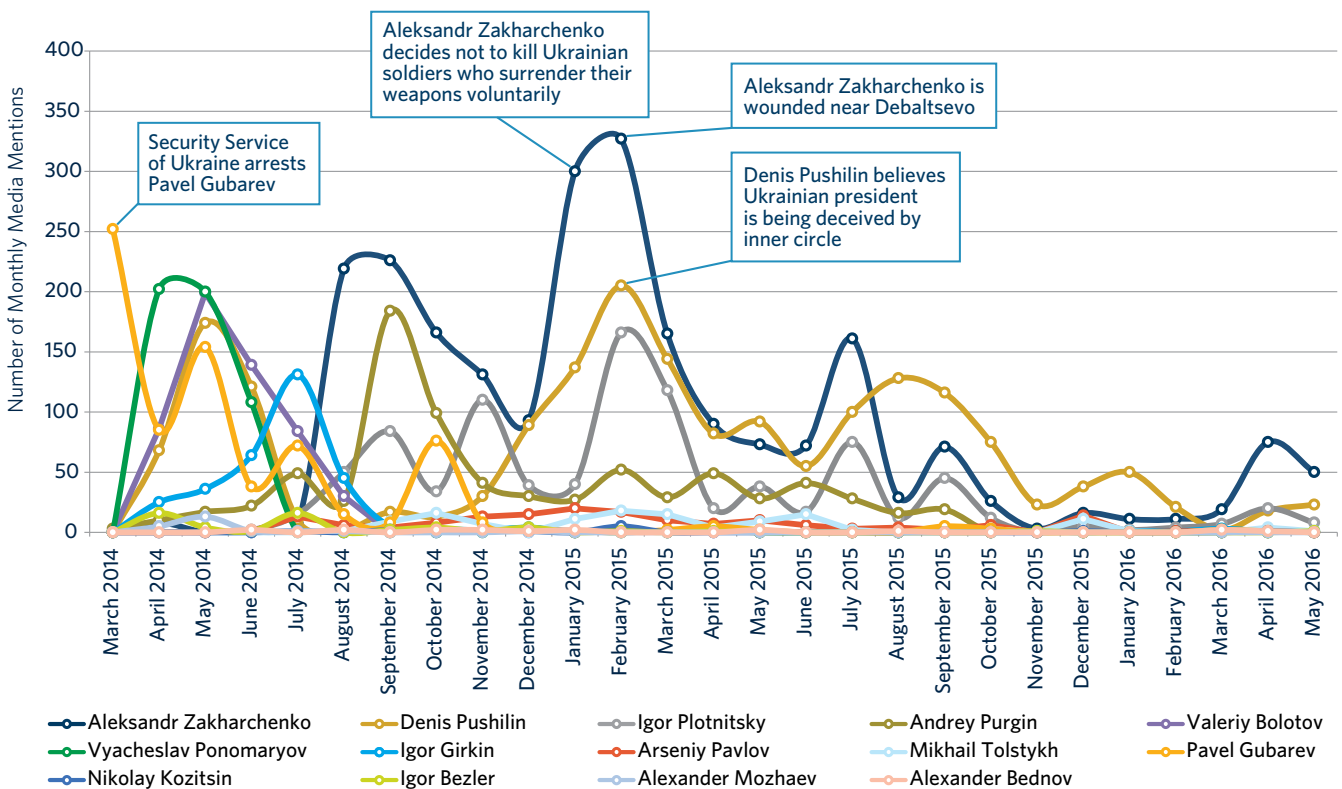
Consequently, Russia has started curbing volunteer activity—dissolving the groups of Cossacks in the people's republics and disciplining volunteers and activists.

region.”⁶⁵ Later, Borodai himself was removed, most likely also through a collective decision.

Since the summer of 2015, people have generally stopped talking about the volunteers in the Donbas and using the term Novorossia. Many took note when Putin failed to use the term, which had been the word of the year, in his address to the Federal Assembly in December 2014.⁶⁶ Relatively little news from Donbas has received airtime in Russia since the Minsk II Protocol and the fighting around Debaltsevo in the early months of 2015.

Given this context, it is worth noting how frequently major Russian television channels have mentioned the leaders of the Donbas volunteers. To measure this, the Carnegie Moscow Center commissioned an unpublished study by Medialogia, an organization that specializes in monitoring and analyzing media.⁶⁷ Figure 1, which shows how often various Novorossian leaders were mentioned between March 2014 and May 2016, can be subdivided into three distinct periods.

Figure 1. Major Figures of Novorossiia in Russian Media



Source: Medialogia, "Political and Public Figures of Novorossiia" (unpublished manuscript, May 2016).

From March to October 2014, the Novorossian leaders, commanders of volunteer battalions, and mayors and governors of the people's republics suddenly appeared in Russian media and started actively competing with each other for television coverage.

Between the fall of 2014 and the fall of 2015, the political leaders of the unrecognized republics received far more television coverage than almost any other public figures on Russian television. At the time, the media was making obvious efforts to get the public to see the initially chaotic mass of volunteer figures as a hierarchical structure headed by potential negotiating partners. The start of this second period coincided with the signing of the Minsk II Protocol.

Beginning in February 2015, after a spike in mentions triggered by the battles for Debaltsevo and Donetsk Airport, the number of times Novorossian volunteers and politicians were mentioned in the Russian media drastically declined, continued to fall throughout the year, and remains low—especially relative to earlier periods.

So far, the volunteers have not succeeded in the Russian political sphere. In May 2016, preparations began for the September 2016 Duma legislative elections, but neither United Russia nor the more informal All-Russia People's Front used the heroes of the Donbas in their campaigns (even though the latter has described itself as a vehicle for channeling activists' desires to criticize bureaucrats).⁶⁸ The fact that these ostensible people's heroes were not invited to join any other Duma parties—including the Communist Party or the Liberal Democratic Party, which have historically welcomed more nationalistic, patriotic rhetoric—may indicate a top-level decision to exclude them from participating in the political system. Ukrainian volunteers, on the other hand, moved into politics en masse.

Take, for example, the case of Colonel Strelkov. Between September 2014 and May 2015, the number of Russian people who said they admired Strelkov grew from 7 percent to 8 percent and those who sympathized with him grew from 16 percent to 21 percent, according to a May 2015 Levada Center poll.⁶⁹ Conversely, the share of people who viewed him with antipathy and disgust dropped from 3 percent to 1 percent, and from 2 percent to less than 1 percent, respectively. During that same period, Strelkov's name recognition grew from 21 percent to 27 percent of the public. That was quite a feat for someone who had only recently stepped onto the public stage.

Just one year later, according to a private conversation with a Levada Center employee,⁷⁰ those who rate Strelkov negatively (20 percent) now exceed those who rate him positively (5 percent). His positive poll numbers are almost identical to those of unpopular members of Russia's liberal opposition—he rated lower than Mikhail Kasyanov, Vladimir Ryzhkov, prominent oligarch Mikhail Prohorov, and Grigory Yavlinsky, and he was only slightly higher than Alexei Navalny.

Generally speaking, in addition to the discomfort that the ruling bureaucracy feels, the citizens of conservative regimes experience fear and confusion when private individuals, rather than the government, take up arms against enemies and defend avowed national values. Russian citizens are ready to support the revolutionary, chaotic activities of volunteers abroad in the lands of their enemies, but they don't want to see these bottom-up activists participate in homeland politics. They are concerned for stability in their own country.

The majority of Russian citizens are cool on the idea of having the Lugansk and Donetsk leaders play an active role in Russian politics.

Even after a year of television and Internet campaigns, which brought fame to the leaders of Novorossia, the majority of Russian citizens are cool on the idea of having the Lugansk and Donetsk leaders play an active role in Russian politics. In the aforementioned May 2015 Levada Center survey, only 29 percent said they supported their involvement in Russian politics (7 percent unequivocally in favor and 22 percent moderately in favor), whereas 43 percent were against (16 percent unequivocally against and 27 percent moderately against).⁷¹

Even amid the aggressive anti-Ukraine campaign at the height of the war for Novorossia, only 10 percent of Russians were willing to make sacrifices for the cause by, for instance, bearing material losses, going to Donbas, or sending their children there, according to a Levada Center survey from late 2015.⁷² The absolute majority, 70 percent of Russian citizens, responded with the following sentiment: let the government pay, let the heroes fight, and we will chip in with moral support. The public related the same way to the idea of the heroes of Novorossia becoming official political leaders—approving of them, but certainly not wanting to get involved with them. It was a display of the static regime in all its glory.

Toward a Renewed Monopoly on Force

Much of the Russian public approves of the government's fight against foreign agents and the so-called fifth column. According to a November 2015 Levada Center poll, 41 percent of those surveyed considered the government's actions fully justified, up from 35 percent in 2014. (That said, 25–27 percent of the public is sure that the fifth column does not exist.)⁷³ When the conversation concerns real threats, public opinion can change quickly, even among highly loyal people. In any case, the Russian government has taken measures to reassert its hold on the monopoly of violence in Russian society.

When a subsequent December 2015 Levada Center survey asked whether it was acceptable for representatives of the state to threaten politicians and social activists who criticize the Russian government and to label them enemies of the people, 4 percent of those surveyed responded that it was completely acceptable and 11 percent said somewhat acceptable.⁷⁴ However, 39 percent said such

a response was somewhat unacceptable and 20 percent said it was completely unacceptable. Even among Russians who believe in the existence of enemies within the country, only half think the government or its representatives have the right to threaten dissenters and label them enemies. In other words, there are about three times as many people against such government behavior as there are for it.⁷⁵

Even citizens who recognize the existence of an internal threat are more comfortable when they are not asked to fight it. They prefer that the government takes care of its own enemies, ideally, without too many excesses. This gives the average citizen a sense of security: there may be a struggle going on, but professionals are taking care of it, and there will not be any unnecessary casualties. Such a mind-set frees people from having to face discomfort or difficult questions regarding civic consciousness: it allows them to think, in effect, that everything is being done according to the law and that they live in gentler times. The Russian political and judicial apparatus is trying to answer this demand for softer resistance to its enemies, highlighting that it is not 1937 anymore.

Similarly, the majority of Russians believe that places of worship and the feelings of religious believers need to be protected. This is evident from surveys about the Pussy Riot case, and the January 2015 attack on the Charlie Hebdo office in Paris.⁷⁶ Yet public opinion seems to hold that it is up to the state, not volunteers, to protect the rights of believers. An August 2015 Levada Center poll shows popular condemnation of the Charlie Hebdo attack as well as the Orthodox fanatics' attack on the Moscow Manezh Exhibition Center.⁷⁷ That same survey asked whether the actions of the activists in question were justified because they considered the exhibit blasphemous, and only 9 percent agreed that the attack was justified (2 percent unequivocally justified, 7 percent mostly justified), while 26 percent believed the attack was unjustified and 17 percent that it was completely intolerable. (Meanwhile, 48 percent of the people surveyed were unaware of the events at the gallery.)⁷⁸

The ransacking of the Manezh art exhibit was one of two events in 2015 that precipitated the government's crackdown on practices characteristic of dynamic regimes. The other was the murder of Boris Nemtsov near the Kremlin's southern wall. Nemtsov's murder placed Putin in a difficult position. He was forced to choose between the federal security forces and Ramzan Kadyrov—in effect, Putin found himself again in a situation in which he had to answer for what other people had done. This is the position that he and the Russian government generally find themselves in after any high-profile attack perpetrated by out-of-control supporters. In this case, the risks of independent actions outweighed the benefits. Nemtsov's murder did not please the general population. Rather, it caused fear and bewilderment.⁷⁹

The attack on Vadim Sidur's sculptures at the Manezh put the government in another difficult situation. The government's cultural activities were at the

mercy of self-appointed censors from the streets.⁸⁰ The incident occurred not in a private gallery but in a national museum, where the Ministry of Culture had placed works of art from another national museum, pieces that were classics of twentieth-century art. In addition, this attack occurred right across from the Kremlin. The museum, its exhibits, and visiting foreign exhibitions, which the government has a serious responsibility to protect, came under potential threat.

In both cases, the state immediately began legal proceedings against the perpetrators. But it was harder to sanction the people who had inspired and organized the attacks.

The government has also taken other measures to reinforce its control over the use of violence. Russia's new National Guard has been described as an extension of Putin's personal monopoly on power, akin to the Praetorian Guard of ancient Rome.⁸¹ However, Putin himself has specified that the guard is mostly a means of controlling people who own weapons. It is supposed to have command not only over special police forces and troops from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, but also over military clubs, private security organizations, and regular armed citizens. "Its primary function is control over arms circulation. It will be in close contact with the Interior Ministry and the FSB in the fight against terrorism and organized crime," Putin announced at an induction ceremony for the new force's highest ranking officers on April 21, 2016.⁸²

During the 2016 annual broadcast of the television program *Direct Line With Vladimir Putin*, the president was asked why the new National Guard had been created. He responded, "The first and primary purpose for this decision is the necessity to take control of arms that are in circulation in this country. This is now the organization that controls everything related to weapons and firearms. This is both a security system, a system of control, and a means of supervising private security structures and the internal troops themselves."⁸³ One of the first major news stories about the National Guard was that it "eliminated the causes and conditions that facilitated Nemtsov's murder."⁸⁴ This was another way of saying that the National Guard had taken over the notorious Sever (North) Battalion in Chechnya, the unit that Nemtsov's murderers had served in. This likely precipitated some internal changes in the battalion's chain of command.

Some are concerned that the Kremlin's new forces may crack down on liberal critics, but it seems that, for the moment, they are equally concerned with disciplining semi-autonomous patriots and maintaining the state's monopoly on force. In reality, their top current priority is to impose new constraints on and guidelines for Ramzan Kadyrov's work as regional head of Chechnya. One reason for this is that he has become a risky role model and potential patron of the supporters of autonomous patriotic action.⁸⁵

Kadyrov, of course, is not the only person who can galvanize amateur pro-regime activists. In contrast to the youth organizations that flourished under Vladislav Surkov, his successor as Putin's deputy chief of staff—Vyacheslav

Volodin—has presided over the creation of groups like the All-Russia People’s Front, which have gathered a wide range of activists who are supposed to support the regime. Unlike Nashi and other patriotic groups, this organization is focused less on lashing out at foreign enemies or the fifth column than on combating corrupt bureaucrats and dishonest business leaders. As a direct result of the activism of the People’s Front, four governors have been removed from their posts and, in some cases, arrested.⁸⁶ The group’s goals are set in the Kremlin but activists are allowed to take initiative. What is key is that they never resort to revolutionary street protests or violence, even symbolic violence. Instead, they must try to reach goals by appealing to the president and other governmental institutions.

Given this movement against corruption, some commentators suggest Russia is on the verge of liberalization.⁸⁷ That misses the point. What should be anticipated is the country’s return to a familiar state of static authoritarianism. The government is curtailing spontaneous pro-state activities and extreme actions in the struggle against foreign and domestic enemies. In some respects, this change may look like a form of—or the start of—liberalization. But it would be presumptuous to expect these trends to be accompanied by other reforms.

The Legitimizing Power of Procedure

Returning to the issue of how the Russian regime legitimates its authority, the government does possess qualities of what German political thinker Max Weber called “charismatic authority,” wherein a leader acts as both chief and prophet.⁸⁸ But contemporary Russia is not a revolutionary dictatorship founded on the basis of a violent coup—institutionalized procedures and popular approval play a vital role in keeping the current political system in place. Despite the endless criticism of government policies in the 1990s, the current Russian regime remains legally and factually heir to the system that was created under former Russian president Boris Yeltsin, even if it is trying ideologically to establish itself as the successor to both the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire.

Even classical revolutionary regimes typically try to legitimize their rule by creating rituals and formalized procedures eventually. This is because the rule-by-charisma model is unstable—the leader has to constantly prove his or her right to remain in power by performing new feats of strength. Therefore, many revolutionary leaders eventually shift to a more conservative model whereby their primary role is to guard the revolution’s legacy.

In Russia, the regime’s source of legitimacy—its moral and legal foundation—is based not only on the idea that the national leader rules the country, but also on the principle that the leadership does everything lawfully and according to established procedures. True, charismatic statements are important for

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the leadership's identity—statements about leading the country on the right path or the fact that the majority of the public approves of the government. But this does not negate the power of procedure. The final say as to what the right path is, who has the most experience, and what constitutes the will of the majority happens through elections, legal action, and court decisions.

This is what sets Russia's behavior apart from that of many regimes that appear similar on the surface. The president of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, can publicly admit that in the 1990s he bypassed the courts and ordered the execution of Belarusian crime bosses and the top figures of various criminal organizations—there is no need for him to stand on ceremony for bandits. In 2006, Lukashenko admitted to changing electoral results to make the election appear more realistic.⁸⁹ In analogous situations, Putin always says something along the lines of the decision being what the court ruled or the result being how the electorate voted. Only afterward does he give his own opinion regarding the participants in court cases and his political opponents. Some accuse him of hypocrisy. But this hypocrisy has a purpose: to render institutions significant. Together, along with the support of the masses, this is the foundation of the Russian regime's legitimacy.

For the same reason, Putin behaved differently than many other authoritarian rulers when his constitutionally allotted time as president was set to expire in 2008. Any number of authoritarian rulers—such as Hugo Chavez, Islam Karimov, Alexander Lukashenko, Ferdinand Marcos, Slobodan Milošević, and Nursultan Nazarbayev—have extended the political status quo via popular referenda, new constitutions, and even ad hoc laws. But Putin felt it was important to follow procedure, even if only in name.

Why does this happen? Why is it so important for the Russian regime? The primary reason is that the Russian government still maintains its legitimacy through institutions, not through the kind of revolutionary public support that bypasses institutional power. Yes, the authorities may sometimes bend or break the rules and the institutions are totally subservient to the leadership, but the last thing they are interested in is the total destruction of these institutions.

Decentralized and uncontrolled political activism—which breaks laws in the name of truth, justice, and the struggle against enemies—looks extremely inorganic as a foundation of power for the modern Russian regime. It is difficult to reconcile stability, which the government touts as its main accomplishment, with the boys from the Uralvagonzavod machine-building factory who want to defend that stability by improvised means.

In addition, the Russian leadership understands that pro-government activists aren't going to save them in a tight situation. The so-called *titushky* rent-a-thugs and the boys from Donetsk could not save former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich. The camel cavalry could not save former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, and adoring crowds could not save Muammar Qaddafi

in Libya. It is far more effective to use professional security forces and to remove the underlying causes of protest in the first place.

The higher-ups in the Russian government understand that the conservative, near-monarchical regime that they have constructed is incompatible with large-scale, decentralized political activism. Going down that road would devalue formal procedures and dilute the government's monopoly on force.

Why, then, is the Russian regime more afraid of liberal critics than ultra-right nationalist ones? The Kremlin takes solace in the fact that these activists do not seem to be backed by the West. Even though they are more popular than the liberal opposition, the patriots are a purely domestic threat and more easily managed. After all, even the weak Yeltsin defeated both the far left and the nationalists barricaded in the White House in October 1993. By contrast, the liberal critics of the Russian regime have foreign backing. That formula helped a group of weak, often disparate dissidents succeed in breaking up the Soviet Union—or so the logic goes. Real danger comes not from internal strength, but from external support. This method of evaluating political threats conforms to the worldview Russia's current rulers hold, not to mention the vast majority of Russian citizens.

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The Potential Merits of Static Authoritarianism

In light of these political calculations, which type of regime—dynamic or static—is better for Russia's development? After all, almost everyone agrees that the country cannot afford to stay the way it is; it has to change even just to maintain its current status. So which sort of relationship between rulers and ruled is the most beneficial for future reforms?

One could conclude that because a dynamic regime requires more public activity, it more effectively prepares the people for future political participation. It encourages greater civil engagement, independent associations, and more horizontal connectivity. Dynamic regimes can even be confused with democracies. Sometimes they take the form of electoral dictatorships like Venezuela or illiberal democracies like Iran.

Yet there are reasons to think this may not be the case. Dynamic regimes can be difficult to dismantle or reform because both the top tier of the bureaucracy and regular citizens are in thrall to the state ideology. Mass regimes of this type tend to gather inertia, making it difficult to shift course. Besides that, dynamic regimes often may result in a bad form of politicization, in the sense that such regimes don't just stimulate activity—they also seem to pervert it. The loyal public may grow accustomed to the government's flattery and praise; it tends

to get used to being allowed to run ahead of the rulers, to participating in agenda creation, to seeking out enemies, and to attacking indifferent bystanders. When they are not constantly occupied, activists often experience feelings of emptiness and sense a decline in their social status. They may turn their

discontent against the rulers (new and old) who are trying to turn the country away from a dynamic dictatorship. Sometimes this can result in bloody interelite conflict.

Static regimes can be long-lasting and all-pervading, like Franco's Spain, the late Soviet Union, and present-day Cuba, but their human foundation may not actually be that broad. The late Soviet Union, for example, proved surprisingly easy to dismantle, even though many had believed that this would

occur only after a third World War. Because they extinguish as much public activity as they can, static dictatorships are more prone to reform or collapse under the right conditions, just as the dictatorships of Franco and Pinochet disappeared almost overnight. Inactivity, or the imitation of activity, may be more amenable to reform than sincere involvement.

It would be unfair to say that citizens of static regimes are totally apolitical. They are often no less politicized than the citizens of dynamic regimes, and broad swathes of the public may engage in sincere political discussion. But this discussion happens in the private sphere—people read about politics or hold private conversations. The citizens of the Soviet Union transitioned quickly to mass participation in politics, even after decades living in a conservative, static regime that branded itself as the inheritor of the revolution. These days especially, social media gives a window into the previously hidden political lives of private citizens in conservative regimes.

Static dictatorships are often more conservative than dynamic ones, and may leave deep strata of societal and economic life unchanged (especially if they are right-leaning dictatorships). Their ideology often is just a convenient decoration for the rulers. And decorations are easy to change. Dynamic dictatorships exist through action, whereas static ones exist through rituals and words. As they grow decadent, static dictatorships often continue purely through inertia. Under the state façade, independent realities may develop in people's private and economic lives, or even in a country's culture at large.

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Conclusion

The struggle over what type of regime Russia should be and how it should legitimize itself will continue. Many insist that the country should adopt a policy of radical sovereignization—in other words, that Russia should break from the West, relying on its own economic strength and conducting

domestic politics as if the country were under siege. These people generally would prefer more opportunities for unbridled violence and the mobilization of revolutionary support.

Decentralized patriotic activism targets not only the liberal opposition but also parts of the government itself. The National Liberation Movement, which organized the attack on Memorial's essay-writing competition, is leading a campaign against members of the fifth column within the government. Meanwhile, Mikhail Shmakov, the venerable head of Russia's trade unions, publicly claims that the "government's economic bloc implements consciously anti-national policies."⁹⁰ Although the People's Front was conceived in the Kremlin to foster bottom-up political activity that supports its agenda, several of its radical activists (like Alexey Zhuravlev, head of the nationalist party Rodina) may ultimately manage to get elected into the next Duma through single-mandate districts.

Those who want to reshape the Russian regime seek to acclimate the public to a higher level of decentralized violence. They want street attacks against the liberal opposition and the so-called fifth column to become routine. But the bureaucratic center hampers their efforts when it senses danger, and it allows their activities only when it is politically advantageous. In the end, the patriots that get priority are the ones who have personal ties to Putin.

But losing its monopoly on violence surely cannot benefit a conservative regime with a market economy—a regime that has not sold seeking isolation, but rather equal inclusion in the world's boardroom.

Sensing these potential risks, the Russian government has reevaluated relations with its supporters, even though this relationship seemed at first glance to guarantee greater, more sincere support and a livelier political environment. Yet while the Kremlin's return to a static political model may appear on the surface to be an unpleasant dip into the quagmire of political apathy, it could actually turn into a foundation for future reforms. Ultimately, this may facilitate a calmer resolution to the eternal Russian question—how to shift a measure of power from the central bureaucracy to a wider strata of responsible citizens.

Ultimately, the Kremlin's return to a static political model may . . . [help] shift a measure of power from the central bureaucracy to a wider strata of responsible citizens.

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