

# CURRENT HISTORY

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*“Policies chosen by Putin, not innate forces of history, culture, or tradition, pushed Russia in a more autocratic direction . . .”*

## Is Putinism the Russian Norm or an Aberration?

MICHAEL MCFAUL

Vladimir Putin has ruled Russia for so long that it's hard to imagine Russia without him. He has been Russia's central decision maker as president or prime minister for nearly two decades, with six more years left in his current presidential term and the possibility of amending the constitution to remain in power even longer. He is likely to go down in history as one of Russia's longest-serving leaders—though he still has many years to go to match Ivan the Terrible, who was tsar for more than five decades.

Since 2005, the US-based rights-monitoring group Freedom House has rated Russia as “not free.” Putin has earned these negative scores by concentrating executive power, limiting independent media, manipulating elections, restricting the autonomy of civil society and political parties, using the courts for political purposes, and threatening the business sector—at times with imprisonment—to deter it from supporting independent political actors in opposition to his regime.

In parallel to this growing autocracy at home, Putin's foreign policy has become more aggressive, more disrespectful of international laws and norms, and more confrontational with the West. Putin invaded Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, and in both cases altered their borders. Most shockingly, Putin annexed Crimea in March

2014, reviving a practice in international affairs thought to be illegal and taboo after World War II. In 2015, Putin deployed his military in Syria to prop up Bashar al-Assad, a dictator who has killed hundreds of thousands of his own people and displaced millions more.

In 2016, Putin oversaw the use of several different instruments—including cybertheft and leaks of Democratic Party data, disinformation, and perhaps direct coordination with senior officials in Donald Trump's campaign—in a covert effort to help Trump win the US presidential election. He also has used money, state-controlled media, social media bots and trolls, and other Russian proxies to support nationalist, pro-Putin parties and movements throughout Europe, seeking to sow divisions within countries and in NATO and the European Union. This year, the US and British governments concluded that Russian agents carried out an assassination attempt in March against former Russian intelligence officer Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom.

In observing Putin's autocratic ways at home and belligerent policies abroad, some see nothing new. In this line of analysis, Putin represents a return to the way Kremlin leaders have behaved for centuries. He is not an aberration, but a return to the Russian norm; a leader in alignment with Russian history, geography, and culture. Moreover, so the argument goes, Putin's popularity is further evidence that his behavior is consistent with long-standing Russian preferences and traditions. In other words, Russians love a strong hand in the Kremlin and a leader feared by the West. Putin represents both, just as Stalin did in the twentieth century, or various tsars did in earlier centuries.

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Russian leaders and philosophers have professed this theory for centuries. Putin's 2018 campaign slogan, "Strong President, Strong Russia," echoed themes previously advanced by Soviet commissars and Russian tsars. Likewise, Western observers of Russia, from Alexis de Tocqueville in the nineteenth century to Harvard historian Richard Pipes in the twentieth century, have argued that Russians have deeply rooted cultural affinities for autocracy.

I challenge this conventional wisdom about Putin and Russian traditions. Rather than seeing the rise of Putin and his system of rule—Putinism—as the inevitable product of Russian history, geography, and culture, I argue that contingency was at play in bringing him to power. Once in power, Putin chose to build autocracy at home and pursue aggressive foreign adventures; structures, traditions, history, or destiny did not compel him to do so. Therefore, it is not certain that Putinism will survive Putin. If Putinism was a choice, anti-Putinism or de-Putinization could also be a choice.

## DRAMATIC DEPARTURE

Those who see continuity from the tsars through Stalin and Putin have to omit a lot of Russian history to draw this line straight. Most dramatically, the decades right before Putin's rule departed radically from these alleged Russian traditions in both internal and external policy. The figures who were pushing the Soviet Union and Russia in a more democratic, pro-Western direction were also Russians. And Putin himself was part of the project.

Mikhail Gorbachev, the last general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, came to power in 1985 aiming to democratize the Soviet system of rule and engage with the West. Perhaps Russian and Soviet traditions constrained Gorbachev's ability to make these bold changes successfully, but institutional legacies did not stop him from pursuing his agenda. His political reforms unleashed other forces that embraced different preferences—nationalist movements in several Soviet republics as well as an anti-Soviet democratic movement inside Russia. The result of Gorbachev's reforms and these reactions to them was a major departure from traditional Soviet or Russian rule at home and behavior abroad.

That departure became more radical still, at least for a while, during the first decade of Russian independence under the presidency of Boris Yeltsin. The Russian political system that emerged from the rubble of the Soviet empire's collapse exhibited many characteristics of a new democracy. Office holders at all levels of government were elected in contests in which the outcome was uncertain on Election Day. Independent media, civil society, and autonomous economic actors emerged. Individual freedoms, both as codified in the constitution and in practice, were greater than perhaps at any time in Russia's thousand-year history.

Consolidation of liberal democracy, however, did not occur. A mini-civil war between the president and parliament erupted in October 1993, which led to a more authoritarian constitution two months later. The judiciary did not become a third, independent branch of government. Political parties did not grow stronger and neither did civil society, in part because of a decade-long economic depression. And yet, at the end of the

1990s the Russian political regime did not resemble Soviet dictatorship or tsarist monarchy. The political system was democratic, albeit weak and unconsolidated. Policies chosen by Putin, not innate forces of history, culture, or tradition,

pushed Russia in a more autocratic direction in the following decade.

During the 1990s, Russia also pursued a pro-European, pro-Western, and pro-integration foreign policy. Yeltsin wanted Russia to join—or re-join—the West. He sought membership in many Western clubs, including the G-7 and the World Trade Organization (WTO). At times, he even suggested that Russia should join NATO. Short of membership, they agreed to form closer, institutionalized ties through the 1997 Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation, and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation.

There were setbacks to integration and episodes of tension in Russia's relations with the West, including the Chechen wars, eastward NATO expansion, the 1998 financial collapse in Russia, and the NATO military campaign against Serbia in 1999. Yet even these setbacks did not derail the fundamental trajectory of deepening ties between Russia and the West. Like Gorbachev, Yeltsin represented discontinuity with previous Soviet and Russian leaders in foreign policy.

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During this decade of semi-democratic rule and pro-Western foreign policy, Putin, though he was a former KGB officer, did not resist these trajectories. In fact, he played a role in sustaining them. He worked as a deputy to St. Petersburg Mayor Anatoly Sobchak, one of Russia's most pro-Western, pro-democratic forces at the time. When conservatives attempted to stage a coup against Gorbachev in August 1991, Putin stood next to Sobchak resisting the putsch. Years later, Putin lamented that the collapse of the Soviet Union was one of the greatest tragedies of the twentieth century, but his actions in August 1991 demonstrated no support for that view.

### **THE ACCIDENTAL PRESIDENT**

Putin did not become president as a result of a groundswell of popular demand from the Russian population to return to the “normal” way of governance at home and behavior abroad. Just the opposite. Yeltsin selected Putin as his successor; voters then ratified that choice. When Yeltsin first nominated him as prime minister in August 1999, Putin was little known among the public. Yeltsin then named Putin acting president on January 1, 2000, giving him an added boost of inevitability for the presidential election later that year. At the time, Putin displayed little charisma, championed no clear set of ideas, had no political party behind him, and had never run for office. He was an accidental president.

Years later, Putin and his Kremlin team would propagate a revisionist story about his ascent, claiming that he had not supported Yeltsin's policies and instead was the antithesis of Russia's first president. But in 2000, none of this was apparent. Even more mythical are their claims that there was mass support for Putin and his ideas. How could there have been? No one knew anything about him in the spring of 2000.

Had Yeltsin and his circle of advisers selected a different successor, the course of Russian history could have been very different. This counterfactual scenario is easy to imagine because Yeltsin actually did anoint a different heir apparent back in 1997: Boris Nemtsov.

In the 1990s, Nemtsov was a charismatic and popular leader, first as appointed and then elected governor in western Nizhny Novgorod and later on the national stage as first deputy prime minister. Yeltsin asked Nemtsov to come to Moscow in 1997 so he could be groomed to run for president in 2000. But Russia's financial crash in August

1998 disrupted that plan: Nemtsov and the rest of the government were forced to resign.

Had the economic meltdown been avoided or had it occurred before Nemtsov joined the government, Yeltsin could have installed Nemtsov as his heir, not Putin. Russian democracy most likely would have survived and maybe even strengthened, and relations with the United States and the West more generally would have deepened. Nemtsov never would have cracked down on Russia's opposition or annexed Crimea. He was firmly committed to democratic ideals, market principles, and closer relations with the West. After resigning from government, Nemtsov was elected to parliament and eventually became an outspoken critic of Putin's autocratic rule. He was assassinated on February 27, 2015, gunned down just steps away from the Kremlin.

Could Nemtsov, or someone like him, have been elected president in Russia in 2000? Yes. Putin, after all, was an obscure figure when he won in 2000, and Nemtsov was a far more skilled politician than Putin back then, having already won several elections during very difficult economic times. He was not an extreme liberal, beyond the normative bounds of Russian voters. Had Yeltsin selected Nemtsov in 1999, he surely would have won the election in 2000, and Russia's internal and external trajectories would have been very different. There was nothing inevitable about Putinism at the time.

### **LUCKY TIMING**

Putin showed up on the national stage at exactly the right time. Yeltsin named him prime minister right after the 1998 financial crash and just at the beginning of a global cycle of rising oil and gas prices, which fueled economic expansion in Russia for the first time in a decade and sustained strong growth rates for the next decade. Under those circumstances, whoever became president in 2000—democrat, communist, or nationalist—would have become popular.

Upon taking office, Putin initiated several pro-market reforms, including a 13-percent flat income tax and a reduced corporate tax rate. He appointed several pro-Western market reformers, including German Gref, considered at the time to be a militant liberal, as economy minister and Alexei Kudrin, admired as a staunch fiscal conservative by many in the West, as finance minister. As for foreign policy, Putin even floated the idea of Russia joining NATO during a trip to Britain in

February 2000. He signaled a Western, European orientation when he argued, “Russia is part of the European culture . . . And I cannot imagine my country in isolation from Europe and what we often call the civilized world. So, it is hard for me to visualize NATO as the enemy.”

At the same time, however, Putin also made clear his disdain for democracy and distrust of pluralism more generally. He quickly sought to consolidate power in the Kremlin, first by nationalizing or seizing control of all the major national television networks, then by constraining the autonomous activities of business leaders, nongovernmental organizations, independent political parties, and later, in 2004, governors (decreeing that they be appointed rather than elected). Putin eventually justified these autocratic moves as necessary for restoring Russian sovereignty, reversing, in his view, an era when outside interests—both domestic and international—dominated the Russian state. Oligarchs and Western NGOs had to be reined in so that the Kremlin could establish “sovereign democracy” in Russia.

While pursuing this mixed agenda of market reforms, increasing autocratic rule, and engagement with the West, Putin remained popular not so much for these policy decisions, but first and foremost because of economic growth. Public demand for autocracy was not obvious from survey data at the time, but Russian society did give Putin credit for an improving economy. For many, the correlation between autocracy and economic development made the gains in individual prosperity seem worth the loss of political rights.

Putin promoted the idea that he was restoring order and building a strong state, a theme consistent with earlier periods of Soviet and Russian history. The collapse of the Soviet state in 1991 had ushered in an anarchic, lawless era in which crime rates soared and the government proved unable to provide basic social services. Putin’s rhetoric, however, far outpaced the actual development of a more effective state.

## THE MEDVEDEV INTERREGNUM

By 2008, Putin was so confident in his popular standing and new system of rule that he handed over presidential power to his loyal aide, Dmitry Medvedev, while he became prime minister, formally complying with a constitutional limit of two consecutive presidential terms. By that time, Putin’s enthusiasm for market reforms had waned and so had his passion for engaging the West.

Russia’s relations with the West endured several strained moments during Putin’s first eight years in the Kremlin, including a new round of NATO expansion in 2002, “color revolutions” in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004, and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. However, Russian military intervention in Georgia in 2008, followed by declarations of independence by two Georgian regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, brought confrontation between Russia and the West to a new level.

Medvedev was expected to stay Putin’s course, and for the most part he did—but not perfectly. Especially on foreign policy, Medvedev parted with Putin in pushing for a more cooperative approach with the United States. He embraced President Barack Obama’s proposal for a “reset” in relations, and then engaged directly with him to achieve several concrete foreign policy outcomes, including the New START Treaty setting lower limits on both nations’ nuclear arsenals, comprehensive sanctions on Iran, a new supply route through Russia for US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, Russian membership in the WTO, and substantially increased investment and trade between the two countries.

At the height of the reset, a majority of Russians had a positive view of the United States and a majority of Americans had a positive attitude about Russia. On some key foreign policy issues, Medvedev adopted a more pro-Western view than Putin wanted, most dramatically abstaining on the United Nations Security Council resolutions in 2011 that authorized the use of force in Libya. In general, Medvedev’s actions were more in line with Gorbachev and Yeltsin than with Putin, Brezhnev, Khrushchev, or Stalin.

He spoke frequently of Russia’s need to reduce its dependence on raw-materials exports and instead invest in the knowledge economy. He started a project called Skolkovo to help stimulate the emergence of a Silicon Valley in Russia. However, his achievements were modest. Some of his defenders argue that he planned to initiate much more ambitious democratic and market reforms after his reelection in 2012. But that moment never came. In September 2011, Putin announced his intention to run in the March 2012 presidential election. Medvedev would serve as prime minister.

Medvedev’s ambitions for political and economic modernization far exceeded his will or capacity to deliver on them. Nonetheless, the short-lived Medvedev era did not conform to any ancient Rus-

sian traditions of autocratic rule at home or beligerence abroad.

## A ROCKY RETURN

During Medvedev's presidency, Putin's popularity fell. When Putin announced his plan to run for president again, Russians expressed little enthusiasm. He even endured a few public challenges to his candidacy. In November 2011, fans booed Putin at a wrestling match after he jumped into the ring in front of 20,000 people to congratulate the winner. Economic growth, the main driver of his popularity from 2000 to 2008, had tapered and he offered no new argument for why he should return to the Kremlin. A poll conducted by the Levada Center in November 2011 showed that only 31 percent of likely voters planned to cast their ballots for Putin in the spring.

The decision by Putin and Medvedev to switch jobs angered many young, urban middle-class voters. The agreement struck many as an insult, denying them any real choice in the matter. Medvedev had let them down; he had promised forward-looking policies but now was stepping aside timidly. Likewise, few elites expressed excitement about Putin's bid for a third presidential term. In business circles, many feared his return to power would bring more redistribution of property rights that would enrich those with close ties to him.

In December 2011, just a few months before the presidential contest, Putin's United Russia party performed much worse than expected in parliamentary elections. The party enjoyed unlimited coverage on national television stations, abundant financial resources, the backing of regional governments, and a bump from vote rigging, yet it won only 49 percent of the vote, a significant drop from its 64-percent share four years earlier. Given all its advantages, failing to take at least 50 percent was a major setback for the ruling party.

The number of votes that United Russia accrued through falsification was probably no greater than in previous elections. But in 2011, the proliferation of smartphones, better-organized election-monitoring organizations, and social media platforms such as VKontakte, Twitter, and Facebook combined to expose electoral irregularities to many more people. Compelling evidence

that this election had been stolen for Putin's party triggered demonstrations in Moscow and other major cities that drew first hundreds of people, then thousands, and then tens of thousands, and occasionally hundreds of thousands. The last time so many Russians had taken to the streets for political reasons was 1991, the year the Soviet Union collapsed. At this moment, Putin and Putinism did not seem like the logical, inevitable expression of Russian culture and history but an aberration, at least to the urban middle classes.

To mobilize his electoral base—rural, poor, older, and less educated—Putin portrayed the demonstrators as traitors and agents of the United States seeking regime change. Putin always had been paranoid about American efforts to undermine his government. Years before, he had developed the view that the United States intended to foment a color revolution against his regime, just as he had alleged it did in Serbia in 2000, Georgia

in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and throughout the Arab world in 2011. Even before the parliamentary vote, Putin began to elaborate his claims about American manipulation of Russia's internal politics, explaining, "We know that representatives of some countries meet with those whom they

pay money—so-called grants—and give them instructions and guidance for the 'work' they need to do to influence the election campaign in our country."

A month later, the explosion of popular demonstrations against the government only confirmed Putin's suspicions. After US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton criticized the parliamentary elections as unfair, he claimed that she "set the tone for several of our actors inside our country, she gave the signal. They heard that signal and with the support of the State Department . . . they began active work." Five years later, Putin seized his moment for revenge when he intervened in the 2016 US presidential election to help Donald Trump defeat Clinton.

Putin easily won the 2012 presidential election. His return to the Kremlin produced immediate changes in both internal governance and external policy. The Russian political system moved in a decidedly more autocratic direction as Putin cracked down even more extensively on independent political activity, arresting opponents (or their fam-

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ily members), limiting the scope of independent media, and making it more difficult for NGOs to raise funds, especially from abroad but also domestically.

## TURNING TO CONFRONTATION

In international affairs, Putin adopted a much more confrontational policy toward the West and the United States in particular, ending the reset abruptly in 2012. His decisions to annex Crimea in February 2014 and support a separatist war in eastern Ukraine—a war that has left over 10,000 people dead and continues today—marked the real turning point in Russia's relations with the West. From that moment on, Putin signaled his disdain for adhering to international laws, rules, and norms.

His commitment to defying rather than joining the West was clear in subsequent actions, notably Russia's military support for a ruthless dictator in Syria who has used chemical weapons against his own citizens, its interference in the US presidential election in 2016, and this year's attempted assassination of a former Russian intelligence officer and double agent on British soil. The West, and the United States in particular, have pushed back, sanctioning Russian officials and companies for their rogue behavior in Ukraine, the United States, and the United Kingdom, while also strengthening NATO and providing economic, political, and military support to Ukraine.

Putin has framed his confrontation with the United States and its allies as an ideological struggle pitting conservative, moral, nationalist Russia against the liberal, immoral, internationalist West. Russian state-controlled media assert that Putin has nurtured the rebirth of a conservative, Orthodox Christian society. By contrast, the West is presented as hedonistic and godless; Russians must be protected from decadent Western ideas. In 2013, Putin signed a law banning "homosexual propaganda."

Putin has sought to cultivate ideological allies within the West, including political leaders, parties, and NGOs. The Kremlin and its proxies have deployed traditional and social media platforms to advance this influence campaign. Putin's government and its proxies also have used more direct means, including financial assistance to parties such as the far-right National Front in

France or covert support for Trump's presidential campaign, to back kindred spirits in the West. Putin's efforts have produced results, including leaders now in government in Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Italy, and the United States who have signaled their ideological affinity with Putinism.

## A NEW NORMAL?

Putin's strengthening of autocratic rule has been successful. He and his lieutenants now control all the major television networks, the parliament, the court system, and many NGOs. This makes it easier for the Kremlin to effectively propagate the narrative that Putin and Putinism represent the return to Russia's "natural" course, in both domestic and foreign policy.

But do they really? Or is Putin (not Medvedev) the interregnum—the last forceful, relatively successful, but ultimately fading expression of the Soviet regime—in a trajectory toward a new, more open, democratic order in Russia and a new,

closer relationship with the West that was launched by Gorbachev, Yeltsin, Nemtsov, and their ideological allies, however flawed, weak, and only partially successful they may have been? Only three decades into Russia's current

revolutionary transformation, it remains too early to judge. But assumptions of stability and continuity—Putinism forever—must contend with some historical caveats.

Autocratic regimes always seem permanent until they are not. In 1952, it was unimaginable to most people living inside the Soviet Union or watching from outside that Stalinism would ever change. Yet just four years later, Nikita Khrushchev gave his monumental "secret speech," ushering in a new era of de-Stalinization. Likewise, in 1982, Brezhnev's system of rule seemed stagnant but stable. Just a few years later, Gorbachev initiated political and economic reforms that led to the end of communism and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Putinism is unlikely to change while Putin is in power. His popularity has fallen dramatically in recent months as Russians have started demanding better economic conditions, protesting pension reforms, and expressing weariness with wars abroad. Popular demonstrations continue to occur sporadically—sometimes across the entire country—de-

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spite the rising costs of dissent. Yet Putin faces no powerful challengers, either within his regime or from the outside (though he does seem to fear the opposition leader Alexei Navalny, whom he barred from running in the last presidential election and has been repeatedly arrested). At the moment, he seems likely to remain in power for as long as he is physically capable of ruling.

But what comes after Putin? Decades more of Putinism? That seems possible, but unlikely. Putin has not created an effective political party to nurture new leaders. The economy has slowed considerably over the past decade and shows no signs of performing better for the foreseeable future. Putin's illiberal ideology inspires some Russians, but not a majority. Opinion polls show that support for Russia's current foreign-policy course is dwindling.

In one plausible alternative future, Russia will not continue along the path of autocracy at home and anti-Western behavior abroad, but will eventually become a "normal" country. Over a half-century ago, the sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset posited a positive relationship between economic development and democracy. Almost every democracy in the world today was ruled at one time by autocrats, but economic modernization eventually created permissive conditions for democratization.

Russia today is a wealthy nation, one of the wealthiest in the world that is not a democracy. Russian society is also very educated, urbanized, and industrialized—other attributes of modernization that typically foster and sustain democratic development. In Europe, Asia, and Latin America,

countries that modernized eventually consolidated democratic political systems, though it rarely went smoothly. Why should Russia be different? Over the long haul, it seems unlikely that Russia will defy these world-historical trends.

A democratic Russia will not automatically seek or obtain closer relations with the United States or the West more generally. The United States and Russia are great powers that have interests all over the world. Sometimes those interests will clash, no matter what system governs inside either nation. But a more democratic Russia is more likely to develop closer ties with the West, and with the United States in particular. Most of the democracies in the world today enjoy close relations with the United States; many are our closest allies. Conversely, all of America's enemies—both past and present—have been autocracies.

Russia may return to "normal" someday—but not in the eighteenth-century sense, reflecting a time when autocrats ruled most countries. Democracy has become the definition of political normality, now that it has taken root in a majority of nations around the world (and in almost all European countries). True, the recent democratic recession around the globe (there have been declines in the number of democracies in the world and in the quality of democracy in many countries) suggests that the emergence of Russian democracy and an accompanying pro-Western orientation is not inevitable. But worldwide trends over the past two centuries and especially the past forty years suggest that sustained autocracy after Putin is also not inevitable, or even probable. ■