The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

How Much Longer Can Putin's System Last?

By Peter Rutland

October 27, 2014



The statement that Vyacheslav Volodin, Putin's deputy chief of staff, made at the Valdai Club in Sochi that there is no Russia without President Vladimir Putin is, on the face of it, absurd. But it does capture the extraordinary dependency of the Russian political system, as it is currently configured, on the role of a single individual.

While the Valdai Club drew scholars, journalists and Putin apologists to Sochi, some 400 Russia-watchers gathered at the annual conference of the Aleksanteri Institute in Helsinki, probably the world's largest center for the study of Russia, which ran from Oct. 22 to 24.

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The mood in Helsinki was somewhat darker than the mood in Sochi. The annexation

of Crimea and the destabilization of Ukraine has unleashed a downward spiral in the dynamics of Russia's foreign and domestic policy, with no immediate end in sight.

On the external front, most presenters agreed that Putin has unequivocally signaled that Russia does not see itself as part of Europe, nor does it want to play by the rules of the international game. Western sanctions, lecturing or hand-wringing is unlikely to change this state of affairs anytime soon.

The turning point in Russian thinking was not Crimea in March this year, but Georgia in August 2008. That was the first time after 1991 that Russia deployed troops across an international border, followed by diplomatic recognition of the sovereignty of the self-proclaimed republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

There is plenty of blame to go around for this state of affairs. Russia saw the West's recognition of the independence of Kosovo in February 2008 as the crucial turning point, breaking with the norm of the inviolability of post-socialist state borders that had been followed by all sides since 1991. When the federations of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union broke up, the borders of their constituent republics were recognized as international borders, which cannot be changed without the consent of both parties to the dispute. The U.S. violated this norm by recognizing the independence of Kosovo.

On the domestic front, Putin's "nationalization of the elite" — bans on foreign bank accounts and even foreign travel — is now being accompanied by a "nationalization of the people." A groundswell of enthusiasm for Crimea and eastern Ukraine seems to have reached all corners of Russian society.

Searching for historical parallels, some in Helsinki argued that the unity of the people and the leader is reminiscent of Mussolini's Italy. Ten years ago, they would have said Berlusconi's Italy, but the crackdown on political dissent and the use of force in Georgia and Ukraine means that it is no longer a joking matter.

There was disagreement over whether Putin's Novorossia project in Ukraine is best seen as an example of imperialist thinking or Russian nationalism, and whether there is a plan for expansion or just ad hoc, pragmatic responses to rapidly changing circumstances.

Russia's external isolation feeds into the domestic nationalization. Putin's political regime now needs external pressure in order to survive. With the imposition of sanctions, and Putin's self-lacerating counter-sanctions, the Kremlin has shifted from "tightening the screws" on the opposition to "tightening the belts" of the Russian people as a whole.

Most of the observers at the Aleksanteri conference were of the opinion that this state of affairs cannot last for long, with the Russian economy being the key point of vulnerability — especially in an era of sliding oil prices. The "optimists" argued that the system can stagger on for maybe five years, whereas the "pessimists" saw the wheels coming off in the next two years.

China could be crucial in buying Putin some extra time. This is not just a question of lending money to bail out Russian companies and pay for much-needed capital investments. China is also psychologically important for Putin. He is driven — as are many Russians — by a quest

for recognition as a great power. He has not received this from the West, so China could be the audience he needs to convince himself that Russia is accepted as a respected leader on the world stage. It is not clear whether China wants to fully engage with this role, either economically or politically.

The most likely scenario for regime change, presumably, is some variant of a "color revolution" — popular protests that the security forces, sensing a change in the political landscape, refuse to suppress. In such a crisis, parliament will emerge as a rallying point for a replacement elite — as happened in Russia itself in 1991 and (unsuccessfully) in 1993.

One can also expect some kind of mobilization of Russia's wide and diverse ranks of regional bosses, who are on the front line in the face of popular discontent with austerity measures, or a losing war.

It is still possible for Putin to step back from the brink. It is probably too late to try rebuilding relations with the U.S. But most of the European leaders would be very happy to try to return to business as usual — that is, Russia and the EU pretending that they are partners, despite all the evidence to the contrary. Whatever happens, Russia cannot rely on Putin forever.

Peter Rutland is a professor of government at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut.

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