

Is the West's Problem With Putin or Russia?

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Does the West have a "Russia problem" or a "Putin problem?" Are we facing a resurgent Russia, one that was bound to react to mistreatment at the hands of a victorious West with violent self-assertion, or are we simply facing the aggressions of an egomaniacal former KGB officer?

The simple answer, of course, is that the question is moot. President Vladimir Putin is, to all appearances, in good health, and given the short election cycles of the West and the parochial nature of the concerns they engender, he is likely to outlast many Western politicians. But the real problem might be even more entrenched. There are reasons to believe that Putin has transformed the very nature of governance in Russia, making it difficult, if not impossible, for whoever succeeds him to fundamentally alter what it means to rule Russia.

In other words, while the Russian opposition's favorite slogan might be "Russia without Putin," we may be nearing the point where, regardless of what happens to Putin, there might be no such thing.

As the nature of Western sanctions has shown, Western governments are acutely aware of the personalized nature of Putin's regime. Putin relies on a small circle of cronies, many of whom date back to his days in St. Petersburg or the KGB, and these cronies are shuffled around from job to job and rewarded lavishly for their loyalty. Putin may have campaigned as the scourge of the oligarchs and at times posed as an anti-corruption crusader, but he has only attacked those oligarchs who have been disloyal.

Opposition figure Alexei Navalny made his name as an anti-corruption crusader too, and Putin's kleptocracy is in the crosshairs of other leading opposition figures, but could any of these figures rule differently? By using targeted methods of repression rather than mass ones, Putin has driven the opposition apart rather than forced it together. By creating faux parties like United Russia and A Just Russia, he has sown doubt about the very institution of political parties. Meanwhile, he has made it nearly impossible for the older political parties to operate and new ones to form.

What we are left with are individual figures — Navalny, Sergei Udaltsov, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, etc. — quasi-celebrities who are forced to rely on a personal retinue of those they can trust, rather than a broad mass of those who buy into their platforms. In power, can they avoid a similar reliance on those who got them there? Won't those people feel they deserve to be rewarded in some way as well? After all, Navalny himself has already said that, "In Russia, it will not be elections that provide a change of government." Without open elections, though, what will really change?

But while elections and parties rely on trust, trust is built on information. What Putin has done, along with Kremlin spin doctors such as Viktor Surkov and Gleb Pavlovsky, is effectively undermine the possibility of receiving accurate information through undermining the confidence that such information exists. In this sense, Putin has taken tendencies within the Western media and political systems to their radical extreme. Some in the West compare the current propaganda war between the likes of CNN and BBC, and Russian outlets such as RT, to the Cold War-era battles between Soviet news agency TASS and Western news outlets.

But the Soviet Kremlin at least openly claimed to speak the truth and, while that was often not the case in practice, on some level Soviet press coverage was motivated by a sincerely held view of reality. RT has been unabashedly unveiled as giving "Russia's point of view," and, as Peter Pomerantsev recently wrote in *The Atlantic*, "'Everything is PR' has become the favorite phrase of the new Russia."

Do Russians believe what their government tells them? Not necessarily. But that doesn't mean they are inclined to believe anybody else either, and that works to the advantage of those already in power because it takes a lot more to motivate resistance than to maintain passivity.

If there is no trust and no truth, all that remains is self-interest. On a national scale, that means a chauvinistic form of nationalism. Russia cannot rely on the goodwill of others or the dictates of international law, and so Russia needs to act as aggressively as possible to get what it wants. There can be reasonable disagreements over what that is and what actions are most conducive to getting it, but the basic frame remains: Any policy has to be justified in terms of Russian national interest.

Putin has rejected the notion that Russia can advance its interests by cooperating with

the United States or the European Union, or even that there might be some solution that would be advantageous to both sides. In this crude version of nationalism, which seems to contrast with China's approach, as seen in the recent climate-change agreement, power is a zero-sum game. This version of nationalistic reasoning has permeated political discourse throughout Russia, simply because the alternatives seem hopelessly naive.

It is not surprising, therefore, that almost no one from the Russian opposition has advocated returning Crimea to Ukraine, nor is it easy to find condemnations of the Kremlin's policy in Ukraine on ethical or legal grounds. If this is the case now, why would the discussion change if someone else came to power? Would the Russian people be willing to accept even a sincerely motivated goodwill gesture from the West? Should they?

In certain ways, then, the legacy left by Putinism from a political and governance standpoint might turn out to be even more damaging and insidious than that left by the former Soviet Union. Navalny might be right: Some day Putin will be removed from power, and that is unlikely to happen via open and free elections. But it might be only then that we see the true damage Putin has done in transforming how Russia is governed, when his successor is tasked with building durable, competent and transparent institutions.

What comes after Putin? It might be another Putin. And after that? It could be Putins all the way down.

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