

Putin's Fortress Mentality Infects Russian Law (Op-Ed)

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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What does the commander of a fortress do when he sees enemy troops approaching? He prepares for a siege by storing up food and ordering his men to dig wells. He also hangs enemy spies and potential rebels.

What does a leader do who wants to rule forever and ensure that he remains safe from discontented subjects? He simulates the conditions of a besieged fortress in order to convince his people that they must tighten their belts and accept a wartime economy, and to give himself the right to deal as he wants with naysayers and critics. George Orwell has given us an outstanding description of that system of rule.

The Kremlin continues moving along that path. The Security Council just recently held a meeting devoted to ensuring the country's survival in the face of Western sanctions and Russia's counter-sanctions.

Judging from the statements made at that meeting by President Vladimir Putin and Security

Council Chief Nikolai Patrushev, almost no reference was made to a military response. (Apparently, the international reaction to Putin's recent announcement that Russia was adding 40 new intercontinental missiles to its nuclear arsenal was sufficient.)

This time the meeting focused on the economy. Putin explained that the Western sanctions would remain in place for a long time, and that they had been imposed because "we are conducting an independent domestic and foreign policy and will not barter with our sovereignty." Obviously, the annexation of Crimea is part of that sovereignty.

Patrushev, who was charged with delivering the keynote address, added that Western sanctions were designed to "change the country's current leadership." And it is clear that these leaders are prepared to make their people bear whatever hardship is required in order to maintain that sovereignty — meaning, certain privileges with regard to the former Soviet republics — and, more importantly, to keep themselves in power.

In effect, this Security Council session was devoted to switching Russia over to a wartime economy. "Firstly, we must make a rapid analysis of all the potential challenges and risks we face — political, economic, information risks and others," Putin said. "Based on this analysis, we then need to make adjustments to our National Security Strategy."

These steps are necessary, he said, in order to "define the criteria and set the threshold indicators for the economic situation at which national security risks would start to emerge."

Finally, and this is crucial, the authorities intend to have ample warning of any possible social unrest. "We need to analyze the socio-economic situation in the regions and conduct ongoing monitoring using the regional situation centers. This is especially important for the border regions," the president urged.

However, rulers are not placing their main hopes on the regional situation centers. Just before leaving for summer recess, State Duma deputies voted to move the next parliamentary elections forward from December 2016 to September of that year.

This move revealed that Kremlin analysts are worried the Russian people will begin losing patience with the ruling regime by the end of next year, and that the authorities cannot risk gross manipulations of the electoral system for fear of sparking even greater unrest.

What's more, deputies from every Duma faction have passed a flurry of legal amendments granting the siloviki the "presumption of credibility," essentially elevating them to preferred status among all of Russia's citizens.

These amendments will allow law enforcement agencies to use weapons to defend state institutions, even against a large gathering of people. They also exempt the police from liability for actions taken in the line of duty and permit them to search automobiles and enter homes without the least grounds of suspicion.

Clearly, the amendments are intended to empower the siloviki to put down a "color revolution," the nightmare that haunts the inhabitants of the Kremlin. However, Russia's law enforcement agencies — that are hardly squeaky clean as it is — will undoubtedly rush to abuse that "presumption of credibility" to advance their own selfish interests.

Now the police and siloviki can justify any excess or crime as a necessary action in the line of duty. These amendments essentially eliminate the rule of law and make uniformed officers the final arbiters in society. They effectively turn Russia into a police state.

The authorities have no qualms about admitting that. And why should they? Russia is a besieged fortress, surrounded by enemies. Under such conditions, no one dares question the Kremlin.

Just recently, the Constitutional Court, in violation of the very law it is charged with upholding, essentially concluded that the brilliant and obviously impartial rulings of Russia's courts supersede those made by international courts. Thus, the events of a single week demonstrate not the degradation, but the complete collapse of Russia's legal system.

Situational necessity now trumps written law. Whatever the Kremlin finds most advantageous at any given moment is what the authorities declare as law. And as high as that price is for the country's isolation, Putin and his cronies are clearly willing to pay it.

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