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Every Man for Himself: The Russian Regime Turns On Itself

The Russian regime decreasingly resembles a well-tuned orchestra with a confident conductor.

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Dmitry Peskov and Sergei Shoigu **Kremlin.ru**

During the past couple of years — especially since the start of 2019 — Russian institutions, corporations, and other key players of the political system have started taking more initiative. They are increasingly pushing the boundaries of what they are permitted to do at the expense of others, sparking intra-system conflicts. The "every man for himself" approach has reached a new level in which the priorities of certain "corporations" take precedence over the priorities of the system as a whole, and the private takes precedence over the public.

The overall context of President Vladimir Putin's current term has changed radically, especially compared to his first two presidential terms. Back then, the system focused on

building and restoring the power vertical: the aggregation of formal and informal norms and institutions that sought to collectively solve problems.

The modus operandi was to not to air dirty laundry in public, provoke conflicts, or cast doubt on generally accepted objectives and benchmarks.

During Putin's first two terms, every institution and player of the political system became part of the overall mechanism, and lost its own agency. Now we are seeing the reverse process of dispersion, which allows institutions and players to have their own agendas and priorities, as there is no longer a single political context in Russia dictated from above.

We are seeing more and more examples of this political divergence. For the past two years, State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin has been actively politicizing the work of the lower house of parliament. He is systematically gaining rights to reprimand ministers, initiate discussions on constitutional amendments, submit legislative initiatives without the Kremlin's authorization, and even offer opinions on foreign policy matters.

Volodin is operating within the logic of natural corporate expansion, in which the State Duma and its speaker aspire to maximize their influence over key state policies. Prosecutor General Yury Chaika is following the same logic.

In a recent report prepared for the upper chamber of parliament, the Federation Council, Chaika unexpectedly drew attention to corruption in the Federal Security Service (FSB) and more than a billion dollars embezzled at the state technology corporation Rostec and state space corporation Roscosmos, forcing those agencies and the Kremlin to go on the defensive.

The undisputed leader in aspiring to political independence is the FSB itself, which blithely jails governors and ministers, intervenes in corporate conflicts, and effectively forces itself upon the president as the supreme arbiter in intra-elite disputes, and the purifier and protector of the regime.

The Accounts Chamber is also becoming politicized under its new chairman, former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin, a member of Putin's inner circle. In recent years, Kudrin himself has evolved into something of a political institution: perhaps the only member of the regime with an alternative vision of Russia's foreign policy.

Kudrin is now using the Accounts Chamber as an instrument to advance his own administrative agenda.

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Major corporations have also been pushing their agendas in recent years: the oil giant Rosneft is encouraging the government to regulate the oil product market, Gazprom is criticizing the strategic decision to focus on developing liquefied natural gas, the state atomic energy corporation Rosatom is trying to squeeze the Cabinet out of policymaking regarding the Arctic, and Rostec is attempting to dictate priorities to the Ministry of Industry and Trade.

Another notable newly politicized player is Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, who is showing an interest in youth politics. He has established the Yunarmiya military youth organization,

which clearly steps on the toes of the presidential administration's domestic policy bloc. Shoigu's motivation, like that of many others, is understandable. He is seeking to cultivate his own political leverage and create a resource that will be taken into account when his future fate is decided.

Previously, the political system operated according to the principle that anything that Putin had not expressly allowed was forbidden. Now, the situation is reversed: anything that Putin has not expressly forbidden is allowed.

The only essential criterion for initiatives is loyalty. When everyone is loyal, however, the system loses its ability to identify and curtail initiatives that have a negative impact on it. These processes are gradually slipping out of Putin's personal control, as well as the control of his administration, which has become too focused on the president and his day-to-day needs, and consequently has lost the initiative in managing political processes not related directly to Putin.

Recent laws on fake news and punishments for disrespecting the Russian government are glaring examples of this limited logic. The policy of dialogue and convergence is being replaced with a policy of ignoring and isolating unmanageable risks. However, these risks became unmanageable not because they are fundamentally new, but because they are too far from the president's personal agenda. Political processes in Russia are ignored whenever the president does not have a vested interest, and conflicts flare up where previously it was always possible to reach an agreement.

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The Russian regime is less and less like a well-tuned orchestra with a confident conductor, and more and more like a cacophony in which every musician is trying to play louder and get more attention than everyone else. No one is focusing on the harmonious sound of the symphony. Instead, institutional and corporate priorities take precedence over national priorities, and are carried out at the latter's expense.

This political divergence has been provoked by Putin's political absence, and fueled by a general fear of an uncertain future and lack of clarity about Putin's plans and impending configurations. The regime is becoming active, but the movements of its various elements are out of sync. In the past, if the FSB was pursuing a case, there was no doubt that Putin had approved it and that no change of course should be expected.

In the new reality, the president himself is being guided: Today a folder might land on his desk that results in an arrest, but later, another folder might cause the previous decision to be overturned.

Previously, Putin orchestrated the overall political context, ensuring political convergence and a single logic dictated from above, even if the system did not always function perfectly. Now Putin is distancing himself from the system that he built, and we are seeing the emergence of a polycentric system with an unpredictable arbitration mechanism: a system Russia knows only too well from the 1990s.

Unlike in the 1990s, today the wars are being fought under the banner of defending the besieged fortress, in the context of a geopolitical standoff. The pro-Putin rationale is being replaced with an anti-Western logic, and the president has fewer and fewer opportunities to maintain the stability of his own regime.

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