The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The Great Turn in Putin's Post-Post-Modern Authoritarianism

A regime that for twenty years sought to be an exemplar of a kind of "hybrid authoritarianism," seems to be seeking to get back to basics.

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May 01, 2021



There is no way of escaping the realization that a major policy shift has taken place in Russia. A regime that for twenty years sought to be an exemplar of a kind of "hybrid authoritarianism," seems to be seeking to get back to basics.

Indeed, I thought of Putinism as a "post-modern authoritarianism" because it relied largely not so much on fear and force as control of the narrative. A three-quarters fake parliament stacked with bit-part players from a series of three-quarters fake opposition parties, largely crafted to be as unappealing as possible, provided a theatrical facsimile of democracy. However, at the grassroots, there was room for thriving civil society, so long as it focused on local and specific issues, and even a lively and critical media.

Likewise, although the OMON, the FSB and the Investigatory Committee were always ready to repress and rebuke, in the main the regime relied on buying off the population when they could and convincing them that alternatives were either absent or else even worse.

Machiavelli memorably stated that if a prince could not be both loved and feared, then he would be better off feared than loved. The post-modern authoritarian, though, knows that love can be fickle and fear destructive, such that apathy is better than both.

For two decades, this essentially worked. A good enough quality of life to assuage the masses; sufficient opportunities for extracurricular enrichment to buy off the elite; limited scope for local but meaningful activism for those who wanted to work for it; carefully-metred doses of repression to silence or intimidate the restive; but above all a lack of hope that change could be anything but for the worse to encourage everyone to make the best of their lot.

Measures Taken to Strengthen the Front

For years, this model was under pressure, and various efforts were made to adapt it, from the National Projects which represented an attempt to address the quality of life challenge, to the creation of the National Guard as a means of sharpening the state's deterrent capabilities. However, there was a sense — both within the opposition and the elite — that its handling of the situation was become less deft, less confident.

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Nonetheless, the regime was still solidly in power. There was no meaningful opposition, the elite were either content or fearful of losing what they had, and the state's capacities, from financial reserves to repressive capabilities, in healthy surplus.

This makes it all the harder to explain the apparent decision to drop the mask and turn to much more openly repressive measures.

Presumably, the decision to poison Alexei Navalny in August 2020 reflected a conviction not just that he and his movement was dangerous – which itself would be a striking admission of insecurity for the Kremlin — but also that, knowingly or not, he was contributing to a Western campaign of subversion against Russia.

A Year of Great Change

Once you start along some roads, it's hard to stop. When he survived and defiantly returned to Russia the regime clearly felt it had no alternative but to imprison him, lest it look weak. And once his movement began to hold mass protests, which spread beyond the usual metropolitical set and into towns and cities across the country, then the "logic" of cracking down more broadly became hard to resist.

This proved a tipping point. For some time it has been clear that there was a constituency of opinion above all cohering around the usual silovik suspects — Security Council secretary Nikolai Patrushev, FSB director Alexander Bortnikov, Investigatory Committee head Alexander Bastrykin and Rosgvardiya commander Viktor Zolotov — who may often be bitter

rivals, but shared a common sense that enough was enough.

What convinced Putin, a president whose tendencies are towards caution? It's impossible for outsiders to say. It may be that he was convinced by the conspiracy theories about some Western campaign of subversive *gibridnaya voina*, which having toppled Yanukovych in Ukraine and embattled Lukashenko in Belarus, was now coming for him.

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Indeed, the crisis in Belarus — triggered by the especially blatant rigging of an election — might well have proven crucial in persuading him that some repression now would forestall the need for a lot of repression later, especially if Navalny's "Smart Voting" scheme proved truly effective.

Either way, the decision was made.

Armed Insurrection and our Tactics

That decision imposes its own logic.

Navalny may for the moment be impossible to deal with permanently for the risk of domestic disturbance and international response, but he can be shut away while the national movement that gave him the capacity to pose a direct political threat can be rolled up.

For months, local HQs and activists have been targeted and with the imminent decision to label his organizations as "extremist," a comprehensive campaign can be launched. The goal is for Navalny to be left as a general without an army.

This helps explain the generally rather low-key response to the most recent round of protests? Widespread violence and arrests are usually a way of deterring future participation. Why bother when you don't expect there will be any more for a while – and you'll soon be giving people much more and better reasons to be fearful of open expressions of anti-regime sentiment?

And on the campaign goes. Independent media proving irksome? Call the Latvian-based outlet *Meduza* a "Foreign Agents" and seek to strangle its funding. And go after investigative journalist outfits such as *iStories* at home — that will teach them to dig into your dirty secrets.

Lawyers from Team 29 insisting on continuing to fight FSB cases? Time to start targeting them, intimidating those you can, incarcerating those you cannot.

Social media annoyingly continuing to provide your critics with the opportunity to stream videos of your abuses, share accounts of your crimes and coordinate their protests? Why not to try leaning on Twitter and other platforms in the hope of replicating Beijing's successes in encouraging self-censorship.

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Dizzy with Success

So this could be called post-post-authoritarianism — or maybe just plain, old-fashioned authoritarianism.

Of course, there is still room for hyperbole. Those who are making parallels with Stalin's "Great Terror" minimize the horrors of that era and misrepresent the current crackdown. This is still not totalitarianism, with its desperate and despotic hopes of controlling not just what people do, but what they think. It is also still being deployed with a degree of finesse and control. Putin's generation of siloviki are, after all, Andropov's children. As the cerebral and coldly analytical head of the KGB between 1967 and 1982, Yuri Andropov ushered in a new style of repression, one of "minimum effort for maximum effect," in which psychiatric incarcerations, forced emigration and "prophylactic chats" largely replaced the mass actions of the past.

It is still repression and authoritarianism, though, and even if imposed with the aim of avoiding the kind of open war with the people seen in Belarus, it marks an milestone in the political decay and intellectual debasement of late Putinism.

It may be that before or, more likely, after the September elections, or even connected with his presumed presidential re-election campaign in 2024, that Putin may try to step back. The prosecutors may be chided for being "over-zealous," some detainees released, token apologies made, promises of a fresh start extended with an eagerness hear alternative views.

But this is not a path that can be retraced. While the scale of repression can and will be modulated depending on the needs and fears of the Kremlin at any time, it will be impossible to rebuild the delicate legitimacy which, in its own way, the earlier "post-modern authoritarianism" had permitted.

Putin's is now a throne of bayonets — and billy-clubs — and he will have to sit on it.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/05/01/the-great-turn-in-putins-post-post-modern-authoritarianism-a73802