The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Vladimir Putin and the Myth that Just Won't Die

It should be possible to judge Putin harshly whilst acknowledging that he does not govern Russia alone.

By Ben Noble

May 14, 2021

TASS / Kremlin.ru

"Governance in Russia is a one-man show."

Countless attempts have been made to kill off the claim. Vladimir Putin is not 'a cross between Joseph Stalin and a Bond movie villain', nor does he command a 'well-oiled machine' of governance with ruthless efficiency. For those commentators who think that politics in Russia is about more than Putin, making points such as these on repeat to challenge the myth can become something of an occupational hazard.

In a recent Chatham House report, Ekaterina Schulmann and I join the long list of critics of

the "one-man show" model.

Why bother, you might ask. One reason is pure doggedness. As long as claims are made that Russian politics can be explained through a focus on one man, people should be ready to call these claims out.

Another reason is more practical. And that is a realization of the damaging impact this model has on Western policymaking. With relations between Russia and the West at a clear low point, we need to appreciate – more so, perhaps, than during more cooperative times — how Russian governance really works. Now is not the time for caricatures.

Straw man?

Some might argue that the "one-man show" model is a straw man — that nobody *actually* believes Putin controls everything. He is, rather, in control of all key decisions, they might say.

Related article: Putin's Regime and Its Soviet Predecessor Are Dark Comedies

But this softer version of the model still misses the mark. And here are three reasons why.

First, even in cases when Putin is the central decision-maker, he does not work in a vacuum.

Other actors — including in the bureaucracy — influence the information he receives and the range of options presented to him. The "one-man show" model is completely silent on the significant agenda-setting power held by others beyond the Russian president.

Second, even if Putin is involved in all important decisions, he does not necessarily impose his own settled preferences (assuming he has them across all areas). A plethora of accounts portray Putin as an arbiter, acting as a judge between competing interest groups, rather than as somebody who simply dictates policy.

In fact, this "arbiter" model can help explain frequent policy U-turns in some policy domains. These changes do not reflect Putin's own vacillations, but, rather, the shifting balances of power between these competing groups. A focus on Putin alone would miss this.

Third, and more broadly, Putin's behaviour can be both enabled and constrained by popular opinion in Russia. In other words, his power is 'co-constructed' with Russian citizens, rather than being used to coerce the population into subservience. And the Russian people's role in shaping the boundaries of the possible in politics will outlast Putin, making awareness of these attitudes and values vital. The "one-man show" approach misses all of this, too.

The 'power vertical', propaganda, and power

These three points relate to decision-making. But the model runs into even greater difficulty when trying to make sense of policy *implementation*.

Related article: Putin to Keep Self-Isolating Despite Vaccination – Reports

Contrary to the image of the "power vertical", state officials do not always quickly and efficiently comply with presidential orders. Government ministries often miss deadlines — and high-profile policy goals are delayed or quietly abandoned.

The idea of the "power vertical" is presented by both pro- and anti-Kremlin voices — as good and bad, respectively. And that tells us a lot. It suggests that the "power vertical" is more likely propaganda — either positive or negative — rather than an indication of how governance actually works in Russia.

Vladimir Putin is extraordinarily powerful. So uncontroversial is this claim that merely stating it can make eyes roll in contempt at its banality.

And this power is sometimes on clear display.

But can we generalize from these moments to all of Russian governance? No. To move from instances of Putin's awesome power to a general claim that he is at the center of all decision-making — never mind decision implementation – is just plain wrong.

The 'danger' of nuance

Acknowledging nuance and complexity shouldn't be controversial. And yet, it can be. The vicious debate around Matthew Rojansky's possible appointment to the U.S. National Security Council is a vivid example. Portrayed as insufficiently hawkish – somebody willing to entertain shades of grey — some suggested Rojansky was a 'useful idiot' or paid agent of the Kremlin.

A 12 May open letter rightly called out the attacks on Rojansky as attempts to discredit him and 'shut down policy debate'.

This politicized suspicion of nuance is not new — nor is it likely to go away soon.

But its effects might be less pernicious if people felt more able to decouple complexity and criticism. It should be possible to judge Putin harshly whilst acknowledging that he does not govern Russia alone. And it should be possible to note the nuances of governance in Russia without being accused of condoning the Kremlin.

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

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/05/14/vladimir-putin-and-the-myth-that-just-wont-die-a73891