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Purges and Professionals: the Transformed Russian Regime

The changes of 2020–2021 have proven so sweeping and profound that the Russian regime is undergoing a renaissance. You are now either pro-regime or anti-regime—i.e., criminal.

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Few would contest that the Russian regime has taken on a new character. The resetting of the clock on presidential terms, the attempt on the life of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, and the avalanche of new bans and repressive measures all show that the mechanisms of the political system in Russia have dramatically changed.

So far, the most obvious result of the regime's transformation is the ramping up of repression and crackdown on the non-system opposition. But important changes are also taking place inside the power system, and their consequences will soon be felt.

One of the main new characteristics of the Russian regime is the lack of coordination among its key elements. The overall conservative trend has grown stronger, but political control from above has grown weaker, and the decisionmaking process has become fragmented. The old system of overseeing domestic policy in Russia, which had enabled the Kremlin to organize the political playing field according to its needs, no longer exists.

That system began to fall apart back in 2016, with the appointment of Sergei Kiriyenko as curator of domestic policy. Attempts to build manageable competition were replaced with bureaucratic administration, and deals with ultimatums.

By 2020, there was a clear divide between the "in-system" field (the nominal opposition that in reality plays by the Kremlin's rules), overseen by curators within the presidential administration, and the "non-system" field (the real opposition), which is the distinct preserve of the *siloviki*, or security services. The involvement of the latter ultimately led to the criminalization of the non-system opposition.

If before political repression was targeted and coordinated, now it has started to be applied en masse and indiscriminately. Now it's not just specific opposition figures and their organizations that are persecuted but protest itself.

And the concept of protest itself is interpreted in its broadest sense: it's not just taking to the streets, but even posts on social media, retweets, and any criticism of the regime and its values (hence the battle for the "correct" interpretation of history) that are perceived as anti-regime actions. The crackdown now extends far beyond the non-system opposition.

The current crushing of protest entails a complete purge of the political arena: a purge that is badly coordinated and carried out without any kind of coherent strategy or analysis of the consequences. The two chambers of the Russian parliament compete to see which can churn out more tough, restrictive laws as a way of earning political capital, resulting in a tsunami of legislative activity.

Since any attempts to go against this prohibitive flow mean political suicide, the Russian political class will only become increasingly conservative and radically anti-liberal, purging its ranks of anyone with any qualms.

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At the same time, the revitalized Russian regime demonstratively shows that the small issue of legality is no longer of any concern for the authorities, as illustrated by the use of tree stumps as polling booths in last year's nationwide vote, the decision to turn a police station into an impromptu courtroom for Navalny's hearing, and the retrospective application of new bans on people running for election.

Meanwhile, President Vladimir Putin, who distanced himself from routine affairs long ago, has turned into an eternal and static backdrop following the resetting of the clock on presidential terms. He is conserving the system rather than developing it.

Instead of a small circle of people being responsible for political repression, it's now the work

of thousands of officials, none of whom individually carry any political responsibility. People are now persecuted on autopilot, which means that anyone can be defined as "anti-regime," regardless of their status or connections.

This collective lack of responsibility means that the domestic policy overseers feel no responsibility for what is happening to Navalny because it's the FSB that is behind it.

And the FSB feels no responsibility for the political risks associated with going after the opposition leader because that's not their responsibility: it's a problem for the overseers from the presidential administration.

Political problems are now dealt with by everyone and no one, as a result of which any hint of opposition is becoming toxic. Students are expelled, and people are fired from their jobs merely for taking part in a protest, "liking" a post on social media, or speaking out against the regime.

Instead of political strategists managing politics, the responsibility has been pushed onto the heads of companies, HR managers, university rectors, and school head teachers.

In his first two presidential terms, Putin built a management system by delegating specific areas to his close associates, many of whom remain influential figures within the regime. Today, however, Putin tends to trust those who are, in his eyes, top professionals: depoliticized technocrats who are not prone to populism and making irresponsible decisions.

This is the logic behind appointing Igor Kobzev from the Emergencies Ministry the governor of the Irkutsk region, which has been hit by natural disasters, and appointing Vladimir Uyba — a doctor — governor of the Komi Republic, which suffered badly last year during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The flip side of recruiting professionals to deal with problems is that in affairs of state, which require inclusivity and flexibility, a purely professional approach can prove too narrow-minded and risky. Since Uyba—who had no experience in public policy — was appointed, several scandals and conflicts have erupted in the Komi Republic.

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Putin's reliance on a small circle of professionals means that decisions made by some institutions of power clash with the interests of others. When television curators ramp up the level of aggression and fear in state propaganda, domestic policy overseers have to work out what to do about anxious voters. When the Kremlin warns against spreading hysteria over the coronavirus, the regional governors don't know where to put their many patients.

The problem with this kind of narrow approach is that it precludes broad discussion and fails to take into account all the factors at play. As a result, decisions often end up being one-sided, and cause conflict.

It also leaves no role for society as an element of political life: what are the masses needed for when problems are solved by specially selected professionals?

The changes of 2020–2021 have proven so sweeping and profound that the Russian regime is undergoing a renaissance. Questions of successors and change have become moot: the system is preparing for a long period of conservation and the introduction of strict regulations on political behavior.

Everything is either pro-regime or anti-regime—i.e., criminal.

This will mean increased pressure on the media, tougher internet controls, and the strict regulation of any public activity. Because of this new, fragmented decisionmaking process, the government will make more and more mistakes. Protests will be crushed, the real opposition will be regionalized, and the fight against the anti-regime movement will extend to opposition-minded politicians in in-system parties and critically thinking journalists.

The crackdown on everything outside the system will inevitably shrink the playing field of the system too, and it will become tougher to get admitted inside that system.

At the same time, Putin himself will become increasingly vulnerable. He is turning into a symbol whose institutional value is growing, while his personal influence is waning. The Putin regime is no longer Putin's regime: it is accelerating its expansion, transforming the president from the subject to the object of manipulation.

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