

RUSSIA'S DOMESTIC POLITICAL SITUATION

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THE DOMESTIC POLITICAL SITUATION AND THE FUTURE OF THE REGIME

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The events of 2022 convincingly demonstrated the autocratic and undemocratic regimes' great potential for aggression and their negative impact on regional stability and general security. Unfortunately, the trends in Russia's operating principles and domestic political situation are unlikely to lead to the country's transformation into a stable democracy in the near future. Even if a rather unlikely scenario were to materialise and see the Russian regime collapse, paving the way for democratic elections, any attempts at democratisation would very likely be short-lived, similar to previous such attempts in Russia. It must be taken into account that the official ideology, which stokes

Soviet nostalgia and neo-imperialist ambitions, obstructing the objective treatment and reassessment of Soviet history, has left a strong mark on Russian society. At the same time, society's expectations and attitudes are largely shaped by a lack of democratic experience and the negative experience of the 1990s.

In the coming years, the current regime led by Putin, or a slightly modified but equally undemocratic and coercive updated version, will most likely continue to hold power in Russia. However, the continuation of a Putinist regime will not guarantee domestic political stability – internal tensions will inevitably intensify, and the power struggle among the Russian elite will deepen in the near future. Putin's age is one factor driving the internal struggle for power as the question of a successor becomes increasingly

urgent. The situation in the government is even more strained with the unsuccessful war against Ukraine. The prospect of losing the war prompts those in power to look for scapegoats in their ranks to point fingers and save their own skin. A sudden power transition in Russia is possible in case a military defeat in Ukraine becomes inevitable – the likelihood of this scenario, however, is very low.

The economic situation, which is becoming more and more complicated due to sanctions, and the mobilisation, which has received a largely negative response among the population, aggravate the situation on the home front. The country's economic resources are shrinking, and the struggle between different interest groups for funds redistributed from the state budget is intensifying. Those who have proven themselves to the Kremlin as efficient and loyal managers and are better at divining the leader's intentions have been more successful in this struggle.

ATTEMPTS TO CREATE A NEW RUSSIAN STATE IDEOLOGY

Putin's regime is rapidly moving towards an open dictatorship. As the country is at war, the last vestiges of democratic government have been abandoned and any dissent qualifies as a crime. At the same time, the Kremlin has realised that the lies used to justify the war in Ukraine rest on shaky foundations and it is very difficult to explain the increasingly radical methods to the Russian public. Although laws have been passed to ensure that "true" information is issued from a single state-controlled source, it is unrealistic to impose a complete information blockade on the population in today's world. The Kremlin launches propaganda campaigns, clearly modelled on those used in the Soviet Union, to justify the war and deepening dictatorship. Starting from September 2022, a mandatory patriotic education programme, known as "Conversations About What Is Important", has been launched at all levels of education in Russian schools. The purpose, according to the brief, is "to develop students' understanding of Russian history, traditional patriotic values and their duties as citizens of a united, multi-ethnic country". But this is just the beginning. The Kremlin has announced that in 2023 a new special ideological course, "Foundations of Russian Statehood", will be launched in universities, curated by the Presidential Administration's domestic policy directorate. According to the Russian media, the course materials are prepared by well-known anti-Western and nationalist conservative researchers and lecturers who are extremely loyal to Putin. The main goal is to explain Russia's special development path and historical mission in establishing a new "multipolar world order".

THE RISE OF RADICALS

Russia's elite seems to be no stranger to the idea that the increasingly irremediable situation could be resolved by a "rebranding" of the regime, presenting a liberalised system domestically and internationally after making certain changes. However, this could only work at the price of replacing Putin, even if any other changes are insignificant. Given the threat of such scenarios, it is crucial from a Western perspective to clearly distinguish between an actual and apparent liberalisation of the system.



Ramzan Kadyrov, Head of the Chechen Republic, represents the radical faction of Russia's ruling elite.

Source: Chingis Kondarov / Reuters

Currently, an even more radical faction is rising to the fore in Russia's ruling elite, and some previously more moderate members of the elite have started to stand out with rather extreme statements. Their behaviour may be a sign of panic; they may have realised that the war in Ukraine was a huge mistake that can no longer be corrected, and the only way forward is to struggle on, using increasingly radical methods. It is also possible that allowing the radicals to take centre stage is part of Putin's tactics to show that his disappearance would bring an even more extreme group to the helm.

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The fear of the regime's image change scenario is a possible reason why Putin relies more and more on radicals like Yevgeny Prigozhin and Ramzan Kadyrov. The reputation of these people (unlike several other members of the Russian ruling elite) would not allow them to be in a leadership role in a regime projecting itself as more liberal. The same kind of reasoning can motivate Putin to arrange for power figures with a previously moderate image to completely discredit themselves with radical statements.

But even if the radicals' rise to dominance in the ruling elite is part of Putin's calculus, it will still have consequences for the regime's present and future. At some point, Putin himself may have difficulty taming people increasingly emboldened by their growing influence, especially if Putin has authorised them to settle scores with their opponents. Prigozhin and Kadyrov are particularly dangerous in this context because each of them essentially has their own private army, from which their usefulness to the Kremlin and an important part of their influence derive.

RELATIONS BETWEEN THE PRESIDENT OF RUSSIA AND KEY AUTHORITIES

Making political decisions in today's Russia is more than ever concentrated in the hands of one person and is, therefore, even more difficult to predict. Decisions made by an ageing autocrat, only considering expert opinions based on personal whims and prejudices, are prone to miscalculation.

The responsibility for implementing Putin's policies and making administrative decisions continues to be centred in the Presidential Administration (PA), whose curating role is even broader in reality than the legal framework stipulates. The PA's top leadership has remained unchanged for years. The chief of staff, Anton Vaino, has apparently proven himself to Putin as a thoroughly loyal and highly efficient administrator. But Putin probably also appreciates Vaino's lack of charm and his ability to stay in the background, so the master of the Kremlin has no reason to fear Vaino might make a play for his chair should favourable circumstances arise. Sergey Kiriyyenko, the first deputy chief of staff of the PA responsible for domestic policy, who in 2022 was also entrusted with the civil administration in the occupied territories of Ukraine, is another member of the leadership who has retained the favour of the president. Remarkably, Kiriyyenko, who first became known in Russia as a liberal in the 1990s, has taken the regime's increasingly rough politics in stride and seemingly has no scruples about supporting it wholeheartedly..

On the other hand, the Security Council of the Russian Federation (SC) has lost some of its previous influence. Although there are still people in the SC whose views have weight in Putin's eyes, their importance and position in the power hierarchy derive primarily from personal ties with Putin (and the current status of such ties) rather than SC membership. The SC's devalued role was evident at a public session just before the invasion of Ukraine, where Putin, probably quite intentionally, demonstrated that the SC was no longer a serious venue for discussion and decision-making. Rather, the SC has developed into an institution where important decisions previously made in a narrower circle are only formalised, thereby shifting the responsibility for what is happening to the entire political leadership.