

Can putinism as a
system of rule endure
without putin?



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

A former law student, KGB officer and accomplished martial artist, Vladimir Putin has sustained almost twenty years in office. That is, he has been prime minister for nearly five, and already fulfilled three terms as president with guaranteed presidency until 2024. Not only has Putin reshaped the constitution, but he's arguably reshaped Russia's political, cultural and social identity. He not only dominates Russian politics, but he projects a strong presence in the international arena. It is therefore crucial to consider the impacts that Putin's removal may have. To what extent can this system of rule survive without the architect himself? This paper aims to provide a detailed analysis of first and foremost, what Putinism entails, before debating whether or not the system could endure without Putin as president, or in any position of political power.

There is not an agreed definition for Putinism but there are multiple components of the system which can be agreed on. The first feature of the system and Putin's main ambition is the restoration and consolidation of power and a strong 'statehood' (*gosudarstvenost*). The 1990s were engulfed in political and economic instability. The fragmentation of the elite "prevented power maximization", leading to "constant reshuffling of winning coalitions" (Gel'man, 2015, p. 70) and deemed it impossible to implement reform. By the end of the 90s, Russia was left a vulnerable state without clear direction. Therefore, during his years in office, Putin made every effort to reconstruct a strong, functional state according to his ideas of how to progress and create stability.

One major step towards taking control back, was to increase personal power by centralising authority and reducing or even stripping other power sources

<https://assignbuster.com/can-putinism-as-a-system-of-rule-endure-without-putin/>

of influence. The two main targets were the business elite and the regional governments. During his first term, Putin undertook the task to establish a new social contract with the business elite. Many big businesses such as Gazprom have succumbed to full state control as a result of the agreed social contract, which allows the oligarchs to continue making money on the terms that they reduce their influence over mass media and agree to not operate against the Kremlin (Sakwa, 2014). However, this measure alone did not initially persuade all members of the business elite to sign this contract, encouraging Putin to employ tougher measures. Most notably, October 2003 saw the arrest of Yukos' Khodorkovsky on charges of corruption and he was sentenced to long-term imprisonment before going into exile (Hale, 2010). Whilst there was indeed evidence of tax evasion and fraud on his behalf, the move from Putin was to ultimately intimidate potential significant businesses from entangling in the Kremlin's affairs and eventually, these measures combined removed oligarchs altogether from being directly involved in politics. Another source of unwanted influence came from the regional governors and consequently Putin introduced multiple reforms to reduce their powers. Seven new federal districts were established in 2000 controlled by Putin's representatives who were to eradicate direct contact between the governors and the President (Busygina, 2016), whilst simultaneously discouraging governors from breaking federal law (Hale, 2010). During his second term, Putin saw the Beslan school siege in 2004 as an opportunity, as tenuous as it was, to abolish direct gubernational elections and replace them with a new electoral system by restructuring the Upper House of the Russian Parliament (Hashim, 2005). As a result, Putin exercises greater political control over the governors, depriving them of incentives to support

oppositional parties and coercing them into supporting United Russia (Golosov, 2011, p. 403).

By reducing the powers of oligarchs and regional governors, Putin has eliminated rival political ‘ power verticals’ (Hale, 2009). The ‘ power vertical’ (*vertikal’ vlasti*) is a particularly important tool in Putin’s state-building and consolidation of power. Once again, the definitions for such a term are blurred, but Monaghan believes that the *vertikal’ vlasti* essentially refers to the “ nature and...political culture” (2012, p. 16) of the ‘ circle of shared responsibility’ (*krugovaya poruka*) – a group mechanism designed to reduce errors and catastrophes for the authorities themselves. The *krugovaya poruka* forces officials “ to give an appearance not only of reliability but also of loyalty” (Sakwa, 2014, p. 50) – that is, the structure of the vertical requires that superiors provide a degree of protection to the subordinate level in return for total loyalty and obedience (Ibid.). This results in an unbreakable patron-client system which combines both state and big businesses, blending formal structures with informal networks. The power vertical is arguably one of the most crucial developments in Russian politics (Monaghan, 2012) because it secures Putin at the top of the chain as the chief patron from which he can coordinate and overlook all governmental institutions whilst the clients or ‘ sub-patrons’ serve to fulfil his orders. More importantly, elimination of rival political verticals has also accumulated in an unlimited source of political wealth and influence; Putin not only exercises control over large businesses and the *siloviki* , but also federal and regional governments (Busygina, 2016).

Yet another concept that requires attention and is unique to Putin's regime is 'sovereign democracy' (*suverennaya demokratiya*), a phrase coined by Vladislav Surkov in 2006. It bears two meanings: first and foremost, Russia is a democratic state and secondly, this claim must simply be taken as truth (Lipman, 2006). The Kremlin firmly defends that Russia's democracy has been created in accordance with traditional Russian values. In a speech to the *Delovaya Rossiya*, 2005, Surkov stated:

'I often hear that democracy is more important than sovereignty. We do not agree with that. We think both are needed. An independent state is worth fighting for.'

However, critics contend that this is merely a formality that attempts to deter external actors from paying too much attention to the lack of democracy under Putin's regime. What critics believe to exist is an electoral patronal system, "with elements of both democracy and authoritarianism" (Anderson, 2016, p. 3). Whilst the hybrid regime is not unique to Russia, Putin has reshaped institutions of representative democracy in his own way under this electoral patronal system, also known as, 'sovereign democracy' (*suverennaya demokratiya*). Sovereign democracy is built upon a few ideas: there are regular but fraudulent elections, which in practice do not give the people a full democratic vote, but rather employ questionable tactics that, from the perspective of the public and in the sense of the expression 'sovereign democracy', legitimise elections. This includes the allowance of genuine opposition parties, and at least one oppositional party can often be found on the electoral ballot. Another feature of the electoral patronal system is the patron-client relations or the *krugovaya poruka* as described <https://assignbuster.com/can-putinism-as-a-system-of-rule-endure-without-putin/>

above. Of course, democracy is still very much limited. For example, on a regional level, candidates for governors have to pass a municipal filter, thus the public can effectively only vote for deputies who belong to party lists after the reintroduction of single-mandate districts in 2016 (Busygina, 2016) and on the state level it is no secret that the Kremlin fund parties or individuals to push out genuine opposition. Alongside this, Putin rewrote the rules for election to the State Duma and Federation Council and with support from subordinates, these elections were to be dominated by United Russia candidates, resulting in a solid majority for United Russia in parliament and with the backing by three “opposition” parties (Fish, 2017). As such, the electoral patron system / sovereign democracy gives in to the illusion of a democratic state, but in reality, the people have very little influence over the direction of the nation. The country’s rich energy resources allow Putin to continue freely practising sovereign democracy without the concern of being investigated and inspected by outsiders. This not only secures him in a strong position of power but also provides a degree of legitimacy and acknowledgement of sovereign democracy and more importantly, Putinism as a valid regime.

Fish (2017) further describes Putinism as a form of personalistic autocracy which particularly embraces conservatism, distinguishing itself from both the former transformative and developmentalist dictatorships which had otherwise captured the former Soviet Union. Despite the aforementioned reforms, Putinism, he argues, is conservative in both its ideology and style of ruling. That is to say, after his second term as President and consolidation of the regime, Putin holds it sacred to defend the status quo and oppose all

programmes for transformation, presenting the present as more than sufficient and using the narrative of the 1990s to justify this. Just as in the past, officials are not hired, promoted and fired meritocratically but instead based on their loyalty to Putin and the stability of the regime. One aspect that enables this and encourages the rejection of a forward-looking and dynamic ideology is the petroeconomy that protects the regime's interests because it concentrates wealth in a handful of giant corporations, which in turn can be monitored by Putin and his close associates. Ideologically, Putin has not shied away from implementing, what may seem to the West, traditionalist laws. The Russian Orthodox Church has received a more prominent role and Putin has explicitly condemned the West's commitment to gender equality and LGBT rights, passing the law "for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values", or more commonly, the "gay propaganda law". More recently, Putin decriminalised some forms of domestic violence, which entitle men to a free blow before attacks are considered criminal (ANNA, 2017), opening a more permissive environment for abusers. Putin's own attitude and ideology thus contributes a very personal dimension to his system, tying his conservative values to the constitution and engraining them into the day-to-day life of the Russian people.

Lastly, nation-building indeed plays a significant role and Putin recognises the need to establish a unified country and sovereignty of the Russian people. Putin frequently refers to Russia's history to bring the nation together and does not fail to glorify the victory of the Soviet Union in the Great Patriotic War to unify national identity (Busygina, 2016).

Simultaneously, he presents the 1990s as the ' Time of Troubles' (*smutnoe vremya*) experienced under Gorbachev and Yeltsin, and Putin's commitment to maintaining the status quo to avoid relapse resonates with many. His popularity has not only been secured with laws pertaining to the interior, but also by the pursuit of national glory in the international arena and re-establishing Russia as a great power (*derzhavnost*). This has involved retraining armed forces and taking back supremacy in the post-Soviet neighbourhood. For example, after the annexation of Crimea, Putin's approval rating had rapidly increased from 54% in 2013 to 83% in 2014 (Gallup, 2017). Putin often couples *derzhavnost* with anti-Westernism, the roots of which are still debated, however it is considered that the FSB used propaganda against the West during the Cold War to justify their existence, budget and policy (Laquer, 2015). As a former agent, Laquer argues that Putin continues to etch this mentality into the population, promoting himself as the only figure powerful enough to protect the state from the " dangerous, powerful, and devious enemies" (Ibid.) who want to destroy the motherland. Finally, Putin as a figurehead himself is a significant tool for his nation-building: Fish writes that Russia is " ruled by a single person who answers only to himself" (2017, p. 68) to stress the untouchable power Putin possesses. Putin's personal popularity takes many forms in day-to-day Russia. Many products can be found named after the president, from milkshakes to a frost-resistant tomato; photos of Putin riding a bear receive plenty of attention on the internet; and women have even been detained in psychiatric wards because of their " uncontrollable passion" and love for the President (Laquer, 2015). Since 2001, " Direct Line with the President" has been annually broadcasted. The programme involves three hours of radio <https://assignbuster.com/can-putinism-as-a-system-of-rule-endure-without-putin/>

and television of Putin interacting with the public, answering questions and discussing pressing issues. This has 'constructed feelings of admiration and love towards the President' (Nikitina, 2014, p. 4) as the programme builds a personal relationship between the President and the public, whilst presenting Putin as more transparent and trustworthy to the viewer. Through nation-building, Putin has driven forward a powerful and emotional national identity that the people can relate to and be proud of. He unites Russians over common enemies, whilst presenting himself as the solution and as an authoritative figure to whom they can look up to. Nation-building thus remains a vital component of Putinism. What is so unique about Putin's nation-building are the results of it - an unparalleled support base and trust from citizens who in turn will not question his presidency.

In the discussion of the endurance of Putinism, three factors are often discussed. First and foremost, the transfer of power between leaders and the effect this may have on the power vertical; sovereign democracy as a hybrid regime; and Putin's personal popularity amongst Russians. The power transfer between Yeltsin and Putin was undoubtedly uncomplicated. After winning the 2000 presidential election, Putin continued to implement Yeltsin's legacy but more effectively (Sakwa, 2014). At the same time, he distanced himself from Yeltsin's term without directly blaming him for the chaos that erupted in the 1990s. This gave Putin the opportunity to implement his own reforms, such as the Land and Labour Codes, whilst eliminating opposition and unifying all rival power verticals into one single pyramid. In his second term, Putin consolidated this regime. Putin had the opportunity to extend his second term, however he refused to change as a

symbol of loyalty to the 1993 constitution, and thus came the next successful transfer of power from Putin to Medvedev. It was successful because Putin remained in a considerable position of power as prime minister and retained his patron-client network which gave him informal power and influence in certain areas. Moreover, Medvedev was seen as Putin's protégé, thus Putin had considerable control over him. Had Putin left politics altogether, it may have been a different story - likewise had Medvedev not had a similar ideology and vision for Russia, there may have been conflict. Hale therefore argues that if Putin is determined to leave politics entirely without the collapse of Putinism, then as with Medvedev, he would have to closely mentor his successor to replace him in his role as President in order to "defend [them] from the centrifugal pressures of succession" (2010, p. 39).

In relation to the power transfer, one of the biggest challenges Putin faces is the construction of a robust team that can sustain the power vertical once he has left office. What the vertical currently lacks is dynamism (Fish, 2017), which Medvedev criticises: "whatever the president does not coordinate, nobody else bothers to coordinate either...when all signals have to come from the Kremlin alone, it plainly shows the system to be unviable" (as cited in Sakwa, 2014, p. 50). The power vertical is certainly not rigid but is rather a conglomerate of groups which compete against each other for resources, and as chief of the network, Putin acts as a moderator whilst regularly asserting his power to prevent these groups from dominating him. Therefore, once Putin leaves office, there is the danger, that conflicting interests within the *krugovaya poruka* may erupt and strain the system as the groups

compete with each other for dominance. We must also pay attention to the future generations that will inevitably inherit and govern Russia and be aware that generational change among Russia's leadership may encourage pressure for long-term change in the regime. Many children of who are now labelled the "new elite" have been educated in the West and it is hence expected that they will have a different view. As "half-Westerners", they will not want to live in an authoritarian Russia after experiencing Western governing (Ruhr, as cited in Whitmore, 2007). Who Putin's successor could be is still unknown, however as the chief patron who remains unchallenged and runs a highly personalised system, it has been speculated that Putin would have to nominate "someone young who owes his entire career to him" (Arkhipov & Meyer, 2018, p. 41). One thing however, is for certain: if Putin wishes for his political and ideology to survive, he must choose someone who wishes to maintain the status quo, someone who can retain power as the chief of the vertical and someone, who will not be intimidated by the elite and yet allow them to remain in their positions of power.

Even if Putin's successor could successfully take control of the vertical power, it is still heavily disputed whether or not Putinism could endure without Putin's personal popularity amongst the people. Putin still relies on public support to secure his role as President. The problem lies in Putin's system of the electoral patronal system which is neither a democracy nor an autocracy, but a common hybrid that is often seen in Eurasia. Manfield and Synder have concluded that hybrid regimes are more inclined to go to war, have lower rates of business confidence and finally, are more likely to fail than democracies or autocracies (2005). Such systems thus pressure leaders

to monitor public opinion because there will always be at least one official opposition party that make elections “legitimate”, thus, the opposition can quite easily encourage the public to turn against the system should they be dissatisfied (Hale, 2010). The vulnerability of unpopular leaders became transparent through the course of the colour revolutions which all occurred in electoral patronal systems. This urged Putin to even promote his own opinion poll ratings to the extent that some political scientists label Russia as a ratingocracy (Colton & Hale, 2008); during his first two terms as president, Putin’s approval rating rarely sunk below 70 percent (Sakwa, 2014, p. 17) and has occasionally jumped to 80 percent or higher (Laquer, 2015). Putin’s high approval ratings and popularity also plays a significant role in deterring the opposition during elections, in so far that in the 2004 elections, many candidates admitted that Putin was the most suitable candidate for presidency (Sakwa, 2014). He has also cultivated loyalty amongst the Russian youth through state-run initiatives such as Nashi and more recently The Young Guard of Russia. This potentially sustains him several more generations of support and sets him as the benchmark for which the next president will be held against. Ultimately, “the cult of Putin is more than propaganda” (Sakwa, 2014, p. 227) – his popularity has become an integral and deep-rooted feature of Putinism which also ties in with his traditional values that have become part of the Russian mindset. Putin continues to remain one of the most important leaders in Russia’s history and acts as a figurehead to whom the average Russian can relate to and trust in to reinstate Russia as a power house. If the successor cannot cultivate a comparable amount of support, it raises the question of legitimacy and whether or not the Russia would remain a sovereign democracy or whether

<https://assignbuster.com/can-putinism-as-a-system-of-rule-endure-without-putin/>

the system would collapse and transition to a full autocratic or democratic state.

However, according to Laquer, there is reason to believe that Putinism can survive without Putin's personality cult, after all, in Russian history it is neither an essential nor a perpetual feature (2015). Moreover, the same mechanisms that have built Putin's support base, such as the media, can be used again and again to establish another popular personality. Nevertheless, what will remain is the fixed and typical Russian belief that "without discipline, people would not function, and nothing would function" (Laquer, 2015), and only a strong authoritative government can reinforce this discipline. Without a powerful and stable rule, Russians believe that the country would only fall apart. During his time in office, Putin has accomplished this desired stability and consolidated his power by improving economic conditions and working with the high oil and gas prices to Russia's advantage, transforming the system of governance and the Russian state security (Kasymov, 2011, p. 552). Thus, the Russian people are less supportive of a transition to democracy, particularly after the 90's *smutnoe vremya*. As reported in an article from earlier this year, Surkov criticises the West for mistrusting politicians which has arisen as a result of democracy, whilst Russia is so durable and stable because it is built on trust (2019). In other words, Putinism has the chance to outlive Putin, because it has so far provided stability for almost twenty years and because there is currently no other alternative option that could continue this stability.

Can Putinism as a system of rule endure without Putin? This answer to the question is undeniably multifaceted and no one can predict the future. It <https://assignbuster.com/can-putinism-as-a-system-of-rule-endure-without-putin/>

would seem that as long as the successor could hold on to tight control of the vertical and maintain the status quo of Putin's values and ruling, then Putin could potentially outlive Putin. On the other hand, there is no predicting how public opinion will react to a new personality at the top. According to Arkhipov and Meyer, one thing is certain: Putin's power is diminishing, and the elite have already begun "planning for life after him" (2018, p. 41).

Bibliography

- ANNA – Centre for the Prevention of Violence, 2015. Domestic Violence Against Women in the Russian Federation: Alternative Report to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, 62nd session [Online]. Available at: http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/RUS/INT_CEDAW_NGO_RUS_21870_E.pdf[Accessed: 17. 03. 2019].
- Arkhipov, I., Meyer, H., 2018. Can Putinism Survive Putin? In: Bloomberg Businessweek, 2018, (4557), p. 38-41
- Buchanan, P., Is Putin One of Us? [Online]. Townhall, 17 December 2013, <https://townhall.com/columnists/patbuchanan/2013/12/17/is-putin-one-of-us-n1764094>[Accessed: 17. 03. 2019].
- Busygina, I., 2016. Putin's Russia: The State-Building Strategy. In: *Russian Politics*, 1(2016), pp. 70-94.
- Colton, T., Hale, H., 2008. The Putin Vote: The Demand Side of Hybrid Regime Politics. *The Frontiers of Political Economics*, 29-31 May 2008, High School of Economics, Moscow.

- Dougherty, J., 2016. Putin's hard/soft strategy. [Online]. *Wilson Quarterly*. Available at: <https://wilsonquarterly.com/quarterly/the-post-obama-world/putins-hard-soft-strategy/> [Accessed: 28. 04. 2019].
 - Fish, M. S., 2017. What is Putinism? [Online]. *Journal of Democracy* 28(4) pp. 62-75. Available at: <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/sites/default/files/Fish-28-4.pdf>[Accessed: 02. 03. 2019].
 - Gallup, 2017. Economic Problems, Corruption Fail to Dent Putin's Image [Online]. Available at: www.gallup.com/poll/207491/economic-problems-corruption-fail-dent-putin-image.aspx[Accessed: 19. 03. 2019].
 - Gel'man, V., 2015. Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing Post-Soviet Regime Changes. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
 - Golosov, G., V. 2011. Russia's Regional Legislative Elections, 2003-2007: Authoritarianism Incorporated. In: *Europe-Asia Studies* , 63(3), pp. 397-414.
 - Hale, H. E., 2010. Eurasian polities as hybrid regimes: The case of Putin's Russia. In : *Journal of Eurasian Studies* , 1(2010), pp. 33-41.
 - Hashim, S, M., 2005. Putin's *Etatization* project and limits to democratic reforms in Russia. In: *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* , 38(2005), pp. 25-48.
 - Kasymov, S., 2011. Statism in Russia: The Implications for US-Russian Relations. In: *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* , 24(3), pp. 529-552.
- Laquer, W., 2015. Why Putinism will survive Putin [online]. *Politico*. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/why-putinism-will-survive-putin-2/>[Accessed: 02. 03. 2019].

- Lipman, M., 2006. Putin's " Sovereign Democracy". *Carnegie Moscow Centre* . Available at: <https://carnegie.ru/2006/07/15/putin-s-sovereign-democracy-pub-18540>[Accessed: 24. 04. 2019].
- Manfield, E., Snyder, J., 2005. Electing to fight: Why emerging democracies go to war. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Medvedev, cited by Brian Whitmore, ' The Powerless Vertical', *RFE/RL, Russia Report*, 10 June 2011.
- Monaghan, A., 2012. The vertikal: power and authority in Russia. In: *International Affairs*, 88(1), pp. 1-16.
- Nikitina, J., 2014. Russian Approaches to State- and Nation-Building in Russia's Ukraine Policy. In: *ponars Eurasia Policy Memo* , 348(2014).
- Ryazanova-Clarke, L. 2008. Putin's Nation: Discursive Construction of National Identity in Direct Line with the President, In: A. S. Mustajoki, & M. V. Kopotev, & L, A, Biriulin, & E, IU, Protasova, *Instrumentarii rusistiki: korpusnye podkhody*. Helsinki: Slavica Helsingiensa. pp. 311-331.
- Sakwa, R., 2014. Putin Redux. Power and contradiction in contemporary Russia. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Surkov, V., 2019. Dolgoe gosudarsto Putina [Online]. *Novaya Gazeta*. Available from: http://www.ng.ru/ideas/2019-02-11/5_7503_surkov.html. [Accessed: 23. 04. 2019].
- Surkov, V. Comments delivered to a closed meeting of the general council of the journal *Delovaya Rossiya* on 16 May 2005, publicized by Radio Liberty on 11 July 2005.
- Whitmore, B., 2007. Can ' Putinism' survive after Putin? [Online]. *ETH Zuerich Centre for Security Studies*. Available at: <http://www.css.ethz.ch>.

ch/en/services/digital-library/articles/article.html/53718/[Accessed: 27.04. 2019].