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# PUTIN 2036

**THE NEXT SIXTEEN YEARS:  
WHAT CAN WE EXPECT?**

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# PUTIN 2036

## The Next Sixteen Years: What Can We Expect?

Kate C. Langdon and Vladimir Tismaneanu

To most of those who study Russian politics, and likely to most of those who do not study Russian politics, the results of the constitutional referendum announced on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020 came as no shock. 78.56 percent of voters approved “reforms” that guaranteed a minimum wage and state pensions, wrote heterosexuality into the nation’s legal foundation, and expanded Vladimir Putin’s presidential powers and his ability to stay in office for another sixteen years. But it was more than just a modern bread and circus. It was yet another confirmation of the majority of the Russian population’s desire for “stability,” for protection from external and internal decadent Western saboteurs, for the prevention of another chaotic democratic revolution, and for authoritarianism over democracy. It was not difficult to guess that the referendum would pass; the hard part is deciphering how and why a (supposed) democracy would continue to overwhelming vote, again and again, to confirm the majority’s desire for Putin’s leadership and policies. And, we may ask, what counter-majoritarian institutions exist at this point to make the prolongation of the dictatorial libretto less likely? We disagree with those who see Russia as being inescapably hostage to her past. Yet, transcending these legacies is an enormous challenge, especially now, when the Kremlin *khosiain* appears to enjoy an unchecked and unbound power.

We, along with many others, have been trying to make sense of this democratic suicide for years. Many pundits before us dubbed it the “Putin Phenomenon,” arguing that Putin has sustained power and popularity for so many years because he alone seized power over the entire country. We do not deny, nor diminish, this reading of Putin as an aggressive and power-

hungry individual; we do, however, emphasize that this is not the full story.<sup>1</sup> Understanding Putin the man is not enough. As explored in our book *Putin's Totalitarian Democracy: Ideology, Myth, and Violence in the Twenty-First Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), we de-center Putin as the only actor and instead emphasize the role of the Russian citizenry as the other side of the same coin. The vast majority has enthusiastically chosen this authoritarian leader over and over again, thereby making themselves accomplices in his unabashed façade democracy, authoritarianism, kleptocracy, corruption, xenophobia, homophobia, utopian sectarianism, historical revisionism, international aggression, ethno-religious fundamentalism, and more. Putinism—the penetrative ideological force mobilizing the majority of the population to enable Putin and, somewhat ironically, help him to dismantle the entire nation's institutional democracy<sup>2</sup>—is what makes Russia the totalitarian democracy it is today.

As our research examined the legacies and continuities of imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet Russian cultures, it became evident that the constitutive features of the culture empowering Putin and Putinism are the same ones that Russian leaders have implemented since the nation's origins in ninth-century Kyivan Rus'. Putin and Putinism, then, represent no aberration for Russia. Like Ivan the Terrible, Vladimir Lenin, and beyond, Putin succeeds by perpetuating fears of vulnerability and instability, the perceived need to define Russia in opposition to an inimical West, Manichean Messianism, popular desires for authoritarianism, kleptocratic governance, and a slew of "isms" (namely nationalism, imperialism, militarism, racism, and chauvinism) in order to mobilize much of the citizenry into supporting him and, in turn, their nation's best interests. This eternally returning ideological factor, this prevailing belief in "Make Russia Great

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<sup>1</sup> We are glad to note that, in recent months, we have seen a few more scholars and journalists express a similar need to understand the conditions that allow for Putin, rather than just Putin himself. Consider the following short reading on the issue: Michael Kimmage and Matthew Rojansky, "The Problem with Putinology," *The New Republic*, 24 July 2020. Accessed 30 July 2020 at [https://newrepublic.com/article/158616/problem-putinology?utm\\_source=social&utm\\_medium=facebook&utm\\_campaign=sharebtn&\\_FB\\_PRIVATE\\_TRACKING\\_={%22loggedout\\_browser\\_id%22:%221d23730bae811e148a157fdadda577b52ffbe97%22}&fbclid=IwAR0Jwkt1qyNCdYtx1crdVle4cd5ZUBIWIM9N3PK\\_LAgb9g8pXiHsMvFqilE](https://newrepublic.com/article/158616/problem-putinology?utm_source=social&utm_medium=facebook&utm_campaign=sharebtn&_FB_PRIVATE_TRACKING_={%22loggedout_browser_id%22:%221d23730bae811e148a157fdadda577b52ffbe97%22}&fbclid=IwAR0Jwkt1qyNCdYtx1crdVle4cd5ZUBIWIM9N3PK_LAgb9g8pXiHsMvFqilE).

<sup>2</sup> Kate C. Langdon and Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Putin's Totalitarian Democracy: Ideology, Myth, and Violence in the Twenty-First Century* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 4, 230-239.

Again” that has existed in various forms before Putin and will continue to endure beyond Putin, is what makes our prognosis for Russia’s future so dismal.

#### KNOWN UNKNOWN: MIGHT THEY THWART PUTIN?

But before advancing our own presages of what explicitly is in store for Russia, we find it useful to consider three of the most conceivable external, uncontrollable events that might cause Russia to deviate from its current Putinist path. In working through the likely responses to each, we pinpoint the deeper thematic invariants that ground our later prognosis for Russia.

##### *Variant #1: An Unexpected Demise?*

Our first question naturally arises from the mere name of Putinism. While we have established that Putin is neither the sole arbiter in Russia nor the only driver of Putinism, it is nevertheless necessary to consider what might happen if Putin is no longer around. Barring the unlikely event of a successful protestors’ coup, the most obvious given is that Putin will continue to win presidential elections—and overwhelmingly so, at that, through a combination of social mobilization, election fraud, misinformation campaigns, and the disparagement of opponents. But what might happen if Putin dies, or becomes seriously ill and cannot serve as president? In all reality, it must be acknowledged that Putin appears quite healthy as of summer 2020. Moreover, the Putinist system is unlikely to allow itself to be blindsided: one does not govern a country for two decades so popularly, so thoroughly, without a keen aptitude for orchestrating the long game. Although Putin explicitly stated that Russia needs him to stay in power for many more years because the government has no time to find a successor at the moment,<sup>3</sup> we know that power will not be handed over lightly to just anyone, whether it is actually Putin who appoints a successor, or his kleptocratic, oligarchic allies who do so. In other words, this particular variant is not something upon which to count as the one that will combat Putinism.

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<sup>3</sup> “Putin prizval rabotat', a ne iskat' preemnikov” [“Putin called for work, not for seeking successors”], *RIA Novosti*, 21 June 2020. Accessed on 30 June 2020 at <https://ria.ru/20200621/1573259498.html>.

Nevertheless, it is an illuminating scenario to consider. In the possible event of his unexpected and untimely (or perhaps timely, to those of us who do not appreciate totalitarianism) demise, the government's reaction would provide crucial insight as to what a Russia without Putin will look like. Will Putin have had the time to select and train his protégé? If not, will his fellow cronies in power cooperate well enough to name this successor themselves? Will they accept and support this replacement without infighting? Some may be of the view that too much boat-rocking could jeopardize their wealth and privilege; but, as many a game theorist would implore, there might be some oligarchs or kleptocrats who see a golden opportunity to seize more power for themselves. Might the potential infighting implode the careful Putinist balance that has governed Russia for decades?

What-ifs abound. But in imagining each of them play out, their ends almost always return us to the same convergence point: Putinism is simply too embedded in Russian society to die with Putin. We would not dare to speculate who exactly Putin's successor will be, but in many respects it does not matter. We know he will be a loyal Putinist (not to mention a white heterosexual male, a living embodiment of the conservative values Putin has tied to the Russian identity). We know Russia is a kleptocracy that relies on the cooperation between the national leader and the oligarchs and cronies. These corrupt allies prize this mutually beneficial system so much that they demonstrate near-universal fealty—barring the very rare dissenter such as Mikhail Khodorkovsky, of course—to the person who secures their finances and access.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it is reasonable to assume that even in the event of savage infighting, the Russian powers that be will ultimately reach equilibrium. They all know that Putin has succeeded because he branded himself as Russia's savior, and so they will do what they can to ensure that his successor is welcomed in a similar light. In many senses, the kleptocrats understand that Putin is just a vessel of Putinism: the next leader can attain as much power to embody virulent nationalism, militant conservatism, racism, chauvinism, and corruption all the same. That way,

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2014) and David E. Hoffman, *The Oligarchs: Wealth and Power in the New Russia* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011).

the top oligarchs and bureaucrats will be free to continue their massive thieving of the nation's assets (not to mention its future) without shattering the population's willful ignorance.

Speaking of which, it is not just the current cronies in power who would love to see a Putinist successor. So would the majority of the Russian population. Putin himself has become a cult figure. He rose to power from relative obscurity in 1999 by convincing Russians that he would be the strong, competent, stable guardian that Boris Yeltsin was not. He has made his name synonymous with the Kremlin, which is synonymous with Russia, which is synonymous with the Russian people, which is growing more and more synonymous with the general idea of a united Holy Russia on a mission to reclaim glory for their moral civilization from the hands of decadent, liberal, Western enemies. Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, went so far as to endorse Putin in his third presidential campaign, dubbing his past terms "miracle[s] from God."<sup>5</sup> Putin's public approval ratings may have fallen to an all-time low of 59 percent in April 2020 in the midst of a fifth year of wage cuts and a poorly handled pandemic, but this far from suggests Putin or Putinism is in any danger of mutiny from below. Even Josef Stalin is revered by far too many in Russia still, after all.<sup>6</sup>

Some argue that Russia's "Digital Generation"<sup>7</sup> will gladly overthrow Putin as they mature into adulthood under conditions of economic distress, and devoid of personal traumatic memories of the national past. We are not so sure. Because Putinism has so deeply anchored itself into Russian society at the local, regional, and national levels, in ideological state apparatuses like education, the media, and the Russian Orthodox Church, and into a national mythos of conservative Messianism, it will take decades to undo the damage, even after Putin is gone. At the very least, if the youth somehow manages to seize a credible and visible platform for

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<sup>5</sup> Leon Aron, "Novorossiia!" *Commentary Magazine*, 1 December 2014; Cheng Chen, *The Return of Ideology: The Search for Regime Identities in Postcommunist Russia and China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), p. 80; Langdon and Tismaneanu, *Putin's Totalitarian Democracy*, pp. 161-165.

<sup>6</sup> Levada Center, "Odobrenie institutov vlasti i doverie politikam" ["Approval of government institutions and trust in politicians"], Levada Center, 6 May 2020. Accessed 15 July 2020 at <https://www.levada.ru/2020/05/06/odobrenie-institutov-vlasti-i-doverie-politikam/>.

<sup>7</sup> Jill Dougherty, "Is There Really a 'Putin Generation,'" Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, 8 July 2020. Accessed 8 July 2020 at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/there-really-putin-generation>.

reform, the critical mass of Russian voters are unlikely to alter their narrow expectations for how Russia should be for quite some time. Widespread loss of faith in the system is ultimately what brought tsarism and Communism down, but the reversal of popular rabidity over Putinism is nowhere in sight, or even lurking beneath the surface in large numbers, as of the time of this article's writing.

Make no mistake: we are not fatalists. We are, however, aware of the alarming depth, breadth, and popularity of Putinism in today's Russia. We do not dismiss evidence of protestors like Alexei Navalny and Pussy Riot, or the significance of Boris Nemtsov, Anna Politkovskaya, Galina Starovoitova, and countless others who have been murdered precisely because they posed the threat of revolution. We would never claim that *every* Russian is a Putinist. But we do wish to allay the debatable predictions of Lilia Shevtsova, Vladimir Kara-Murza, and others who, in some way or another, believe that Putin is the source of Russia's ills. They suggest that without Putin, liberation will burst forth. Wishful thinking such as this ignores the heart of the matter: as of 2020, the majority of the population's wishes are just as much products of Putinism as they are creators of it. To believe that Putinism will disappear with Putin is unrealistic. And thus, we can be relatively certain that even if Putin suddenly dies, even without naming a protégé, even if some of the kleptocratic cronies attempt their own coups, and even if some citizen protestors find the courage to speak out, the next Russian president will be no bearer of change, no champion of reform. There will be little, if any, ideological deviation. It is conceivable that the successor, or a cadre of Putin's, might deliver their own version of Nikita Khrushchev's 1956 Secret Speech in an attempt to boost their popularity; however, this will only prolong the system because the successor will nevertheless adopt Putin's winning playbook. He will promote the same narratives of national instability, geopolitical vulnerability, and Russian Messianism that have been present throughout Russian history but consummated under Putin. He, too, will exaggerate Russia's need for a strongman. Therefore, there will be no "Gorbachev moment" immediately following Putin's terms. Putinism is simply too strong, too rooted in Russian tradition, too familiar to fall apart any time soon—Putin or no Putin.

### *Variant #2: International Pivoting Toward Russia?*

One of the pillars upon which Putinism has built modern Russia is anti-Westernism. From this springs the narrative that Russia needs a strong, aggressive leader because the entire country and its culture are under attack from Western saboteurs. Putin has been decrying the West—namely the European Union and the United States—for years now, banning NGOs with even the slightest ties to foreign funding or groups, vilifying the West’s approval of LGBTQIA communities, and blaming his country’s economic underperformance on the West’s unfair sanctions (which, let us not forget, were imposed in reaction to Russia’s violations of international law in Ukraine, particularly Crimea). In large part, modern Russia has come to define itself against the West: in demonizing the Western “Other,” the Kremlin can better define the Russian national identity and create a sense of common unity in the face of a statewide struggle for survival.<sup>8</sup>

So what were to happen if the West, weakened by the corrosive forces of polarization, populism, nationalism, Trumpism, Brexiteering, a disastrous pandemic, and more, gives in to Putin? What if international groups like the G7 welcome Russia back into the sphere of cooperative world governance, for which Donald Trump has loudly campaigned?<sup>9</sup> What if the United States, mired in an existential democratic crisis of its own, chose to look the other way entirely on issues like election interference, internet trolls, fake news, or financed attacks on American soldiers?<sup>10</sup> And what if the European Union rolled back its sanctions, relinquished its (admittedly lacking) defense of Ukraine, and declared itself an unabashed customer of Russian energy exports? Suddenly, Russia would be presented with avenues for sorely needed economic growth. The nation would encounter less resistance in worldwide governance matters, as well. On the other hand, these opportunities would require sharp alterations to the

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<sup>8</sup> Langdon and Tismaneanu, *Putin’s Totalitarian Democracy*, pp. 157-159.

<sup>9</sup> Yuliia Popyk, “Trump’s G7 invite for Putin will encourage more war,” Atlantic Council, 2 June 2020. Accessed 15 July 2020 at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/trumps-g7-invite-for-putin-will-encourage-more-war/>.

<sup>10</sup> Charlie Savage, Eric Schmitt, and Michael Schwartz, “Russia Secretly Offered Afghan Militants Bounties to Kill U.S. Troops, Intelligence Says,” *New York Times*, 26 June 2020. Accessed 15 July 2020 at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/us/politics/russia-afghanistan-bounties.html>.

myths perpetuated by Putinism. The Russian government would have to reconcile its habit of blaming Russia's economic problems and image struggles on the West's exclusionary practices. It would also have to reformulate its identity as a country fundamentally devoted to heterosexuality, patriarchy, and conservatism that does not need the West, instead convincing citizens that Russia can remain just as moral and as superior of a civilization despite warmer relations with deviant societies.

Putin would likely accept each of these invitations, but only in the smuggest way that still supports all he has proclaimed against the Western system. He could use Western rapprochement as an opportunity to taut that Russia has won; that Russia has bested the United States and the European Union into realizing that *they* need Russia; that Russia cannot be cowed and is on its way to glory. The "beauty" of Putinism is that it is flexible enough to manage integral identity shifts. Of course, in the event that the West holds firm or increases pressure on Russia, there will be no rapprochement. Russia will continue to engage in political sabotage, ultranationalistic rhetoric, and aggressive foreign policy in an attempt to carve out global influence while reaping the domestic benefits of a victim narrative. At the end of 2036, it will not matter all that much whether Russia and the West cooperate again: all that might change is how much resistance the West puts up—which is fairly half-hearted as it stands now, anyway—and the degree to which Russia feels its moral grounds have been validated. Either way, the demonization of the West as Russia's greatest enemy will remain a top Kremlin strategy and a widespread societal attitude.

On the other end of the international relations spectrum, what if China were to reach out to Russia as it reaches to grab more power and influence at a time sorely lacking in global authority? China is currently flooding Russian ventures with highly sought-after foreign investments. Both countries have their eyes on Arctic sea routes and natural resources. By working together, they could draw quite a profit. Inherently, this economic cooperation would also translate into more political support for Russia: as two fellow authoritarian powers that do not maintain great relations with the West and are both capitalizing off of U.S. President

Donald Trump's unpredictability, we could see China and Russia further concretize their own kind of anchoring alliance on the global stage as they expand their geographic and economic footprints together. Other populist nations, such as Viktor Orbán's Hungary, would likely come to join their emboldened antidemocratic union.

### *Variant #3: Besieged by Natural Disasters?*

All around the globe, shocking levels of national unpreparedness to combat COVID-19 beg the question: what might the current pandemic, and/or future incidents like it, do for Putinism? Putin's Russia is not oriented toward looking after its population even in normal times. Part of the impetus for crafting the constitutional referendum that passed in July 2020 was to write into the most important legal document a promised minimum wage and pension guarantees, both of which had been repeatedly slashed over the past years. Unsurprisingly, the Kremlin did not react well to COVID-19, either. While the country proved adept at decisively shutting down its border with China early on, it degenerated into issuing mixed messages about the severity of the pandemic. In March, Putin proclaimed that Russia had the situation "entirely under control"<sup>11</sup>; subsequent months have exposed, however, that Russia turns out to be one of the worst-hit countries of all. Domestic cases have skyrocketed. Internal regulations have been ambiguous and largely left up to regional and local leaders. The national government has not offered nearly enough economic aid to its smaller businesses or individuals. Health care services and hospital workers are outraged by the Kremlin's failure to adequately allocate resources. None of this bodes well for a country that has been economically underperforming for years and now finds itself in the midst of a price war with Saudi Arabia. More Russians than ever before say they lack trust in the government's ability to cope with the pandemic, and some critics have loudly lobbed accusations that Putin is prioritizing big, state-affiliated businesses over the general citizenry's well-being, jobs, and businesses.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "Putin zjavil o kontrole nad situacij s koronavirusom v Rossii" ["Putin announced control over the coronavirus situation in Russia"], Interfax.ru, 1 March 2020. Accessed 20 July 2020 at <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/697259>.

<sup>12</sup> Michele A. Berdy, "How Russia's Coronavirus Response Got So Bad," *Politico*, 19 May 2020. Accessed 5 July 2020 at <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/05/19/moscow-coronavirus-vladimir-putin-265227>.

And yet we are not convinced that COVID-19, or other natural disasters like it, will leave a lasting negative mark on Putinism. Putin has largely distanced himself from the government's handling of the crisis, knowing that in a system like Russia's, he does not necessarily have to be a successful leader at every turn. Rather, it is more useful for him to prevent the public from associating him with failure. Especially since natural disasters typically present unwinnable events for politicians, it is best for Putin to keep away from the issue of COVID-19. While more Russians than before are wondering where Putin is and what he is doing, it is not likely that his popularity and trust levels will be suffer too much damage for long. After all, 78.56 percent of the 68 percent of eligible Russian voters who turned out to the polls this summer opted to give Putin more power and the chance to extend his rule—and that happened smack in the middle of the pandemic.<sup>13</sup> Should Putin still be met with angry citizens once the pandemic is over, he can fall back on the ever-appeasing strategy of deflecting personal criticism by ordering mass firings of senior government personnel. There are plenty of scapegoats from which to choose.

Moreover, Putinism is well equipped at turning unwanted realities on their heads. Disinformation is the Kremlin's forte, from telling tales of Ukrainian genocide against Russians to flooding Facebook with fake American accounts insisting on “#Hillary4Prison” to distorting the pandemic's domestic effects. Journalists and hospital workers have already reported how the government is manipulating the country's positivity and death rates: as of mid-May in the Chelyabinsk region, for example, an estimated 233 percent more have died from COVID-19 than official Russian statistics state.<sup>14</sup> Other reports indicate the Kremlin is behind a disinformation campaign claiming that COVID-19 is a conspiratorial biological weapon engineered by the

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<sup>13</sup> Leonid Gozman, “Putin is Warping Russia's Pandemic Response,” *Foreign Policy*, 4 June 2020. Accessed 3 July 2020 at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/04/putin-is-warping-russias-pandemic-response/>; Evan Gershkovich and Pjotr Sauer, “As Russians Went to the Polls to Extend Putin's Rule, Yekaterinburg's Hospitals Were Overflowing,” *The Moscow Times*, 3 July 2020. Accessed 5 July 2020 at <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/07/03/as-russians-went-to-the-polls-to-extend-putins-rule-yekaterinburgs-hospitals-were-overflowing-a70766>.

<sup>14</sup> Pjotr Sauer and Evan Gershkovich, “Russia is Boasting About Low Coronavirus Deaths. The Numbers Are Deceiving,” *The Moscow Times*, 14 May 2020. Accessed 20 July 2020 at <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/05/08/russia-is-boasting-about-low-coronavirus-deaths-the-numbers-are-deceiving-a70220>.

West.<sup>15</sup> While Russian citizens will remain the biggest victims of these manipulated narratives, Putinist ideology will continue diverting their attention to fabricated fears of the abroad and “editing” its own data. This behavior is yet another safeguard that works to prevent much of the population from turning on their own government, whether it is because they are convinced it is not the Kremlin’s fault or because they believe they nevertheless need their strongman Putin to protect their nation. Putinism has already found ways to turn the current natural disaster into extra points for the Kremlin. Why assume that future lemons will not present ripe opportunities for making even tastier lemonade?

### THE REALISTIC OUTLOOK FOR RUSSIA’S FUTURE

The exact path that Russia will take between now and 2036 cannot be known. But as the previous section imagined, even the biggest curveballs are not likely to alter that Putinist way much: Putinism is too prevalent amongst a vast, enthusiastic portion of the Russian population to die with Putin, too fluid to crumble in the face of an existential crisis, and too anticipative of potential obstacles. Putinism is Russia’s institution that is “too big to fail.” With this in mind, and as longtime, knowledgeable scholars of Russian politics and authoritarian systems, there are a few claims we can stake with confidence at this time about the current political situation in Russia and what we expect to see in its future.

First, the July referendum is merely one more indication of Putinism’s efficacy across most sectors and levels of Russian society. It is not plausible to argue that the referendum was just an extension of Putin’s personal greed. Whereas many dissident Russians and pundits, including chairman of the oppositionist Party of Changes Vladimir Solovyev, have maintained that Putin’s selfishness is to blame for the likelihood that he will control Russia for over 36 years, high public participation in the voting process is demonstrative of the notion that there is a popular social construction at play in Russia. It is an ideological movement seeking authoritarianism, a

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<sup>15</sup> William Heerdt and Timothy Kostelancik, “Putin’s Response to Covid-19,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 10 April 2020. Accessed 5 July 2020 at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-response-covid-19>.

deepening cultural fascination with ethnoreligious identity, a burgeoning of anti-Western and anti-multicultural attitudes, and an anti-democratic social contract.<sup>16</sup> While we can only suspect that Putin himself believes he and authoritarianism are in Russia's national interests, we can definitively say that the popular majority believes this is best for Russia.

Accordingly, the referendum is proof that, as of 2020, there is no semblance of democracy or even of hybrid regime in Russia anymore (in case one did not know by now). The constitutional "reform" package and vote were a stunt. Almost every measure encapsulated in this package already was being rewritten into federal law; there was no need to do hold a vote or change the constitution, other than to send a message and to test the unity of a Putinized Russia. Some view the referendum, and Putin's commentary that it proves the "inner resolve of the Russian people to create conditions for the country's progressive and stable development," as a democratic attempt to seek institutional legitimization from the people.<sup>17</sup> We disagree. The referendum was never meant to be an exercise in basic democracy: it was another step by which Putin could foster the vision of a strong, unified Russia with clear, shared values and priorities. The constitutional referendum was not a product of democratic impulses, but a tactic for solidifying exclusionary, Messianic nationalism. The recent vote was only democratic in the most perverted sense: that of totalitarian democracy, as the late political scientist Jacob L. Talmon explored.<sup>18</sup> True, there was a vote, and it was open to all those eligible. But they voted for more authoritarianism, autocracy, and exclusionary ethnoreligiousity. And it was not a one-time fluke: they handily voted for Putin's presidency and all of its cronyism four times before. None of these votes have been free of fraud charges, but nonetheless they demonstrate that a critical mass of society wants to vote for Putin and Putinism. With the passage of the referendum, we can be sure that all supposedly democratic institutions and procedures in Russia have been corrupted.

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<sup>16</sup> Langdon and Tismaneanu, *Putin's Totalitarian Democracy*.

<sup>17</sup> Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, "Vstreča s rabočeju gruppoj po podgotovke predloženij o vnesenii popravok v Konstituciju" ["Meeting with the working group on the preparation of proposals for amendments to the Constitution"], 3 July 2020. Accessed 6 July 2020 at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/63599>.

<sup>18</sup> Jacob L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1952).

We can also say that democracy will not return within the near future. Putin has no intent of leaving the highest offices or quitting Putinism's winning formula. His endorsements of the referendum epitomize this sentiment. While delivering his annual address to the Federal Assembly in January 2020, he repeatedly cautioned that Russia's "sovereignty must be unconditional," that "we cannot rest on our laurels" when it comes to national security, and that "We must create a solid, reliable and invulnerable system that will be absolutely stable in terms of the external contour and will securely guarantee Russia's independence and sovereignty."<sup>19</sup> He spoke as if Russia still existed in a Hobbesian global order, and its independence as a sovereign nation-state had not been granted already. Fabricated fears like this have helped Putin to win elections for twenty years. He even implored his audience, "Please, do not forget what happened to our country after 1991," suggesting that Russia could be in immediate danger of another revolution and collapse and thus *needed* to retain its reliable strongman for the sake of its very existence.<sup>20</sup>

Worse still, just before the referendum began, Putin reemphasized this narrative of vulnerability, saying, "We [Russian government officials] must be working, not looking for successors."<sup>21</sup> This statement is illuminatingly egregious on two counts. First, it is not the president or government's job to find a successor. In a democracy, that task is for the party and society to perform together. It is remarkably paternalistic and authoritarian to believe this is the job of his office or even a job befitting his role in the United Russia political party. Second, to be democratic, *every* administration must peacefully transition power at the time appointed by its foundational rational-legal documents. The government cannot repeatedly contrive states of exception in order to retain power. Yet Putin has once again told Russia that their country is special and must blaze its own path toward national glory, no matter how much authoritarianism is involved. And as the referendum results show, the majority has once again agreed.

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<sup>19</sup> Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, speech by Vladimir Putin, "Poslanie Prezidenta Federal'nomu Sobraniju" ["Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly"], 15 January 2020. Accessed 30 June 2020 at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/messages/62582/>.

<sup>20</sup> Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, "Poslanie Prezidenta Federal'nomu Sobraniju."

<sup>21</sup> "Putin prizval rabotat" *RIA Novosti*.

The inseparable trajectory of Russia, its society, and Putin so far lends itself to extrapolation about the future. We can be reasonably certain that, unless Vladimir Putin dies or becomes seriously ill (or perhaps in his old age decides to move on to a role in the State Council, a position that entails enormous national power, access to national coffers and the presidency, and an unlimited tenure—retirement is no option for political thugs, after all), he will remain as president until 2036. If he were to die in office, his successor would be smart to refrain from criticizing Putin and to fashion himself as the man who will pick up where Russia’s last savior left off. Regardless, the Putinist in power until at least 2036 will double-down on the tactics that have proven useful for the first twenty years of Putin’s rule. We will see persistent anti-Westernism; increased Russian interference in other countries; more disinformation campaigns at home and abroad; the exertion of more Russian influence on former Soviet states; a flexible emphasis on the nationalist narrative of Russia as a glorious power that “needs stability” and unity because its nationhood, culture, and existence are under siege from opposing global actors; and more.

Speaking of which, we also predict that the succession will not be an amicable one, whether the next leader receives Putin’s explicit blessing or not. There is a consensus among scholars that successions present particularly problematic moments in any authoritarian or totalitarian regime. One need not look further than China’s decades-long post-Mao transition, or Rafael Trujillo’s trajectory in the Dominican Republic, to understand this principle. The bulk of Russian history demonstrates this same capacity for infighting: witness Armando Iannucci’s film *The Death of Stalin* (2017), or read the late Kremlinologist Myron Rush’s book *Political Succession in the USSR* (1968). In each of these cases, sycophant “friends” who led the country alongside one another behaved like ferocious power contenders when the opportunity for authoritative reshuffling arose. Taking into account the resemblances between the rules of Josef Stalin and Vladimir Putin, one can expect plenty of intrigue—not to mention political (and quite possibly literal) backstabbing—surrounding Putin’s future succession. Who will go after whom is anyone’s guess. But it is certain that the successor’s installation will not transpire without some

degree of savagery between elites. We presume that the seasoned KGB lieutenant colonel, too, is ruminating on these very potentials.

#### PUTIN'S EVENTUAL SUCCESSOR: A *HOMO PUTINICUS*

On another succession-related note, some have speculated that the next transition of leadership, whenever it may be, could yield another “Brezhnev to Gorbachev” domino effect, in which an increasingly senile and reactionary leader tips the careful balance of power by intensifying triumphant fantasies too far, thereby speeding up the system’s collapse.<sup>22</sup> We entreat them not to place all their hopes in such a basket. In modern-day Russia, a state that has not suffered ideologically or experienced a thaw akin to the era of Nikita Khrushchev, there are no glaring cracks in the ideological foundation poised to erupt. Thus, Putin’s successor will most likely be a *Homo Putinicus*, marching uphill with the solidarity of his people—not plummeting downward toward a disillusioned citizenry. Until there is enough ideological erosion, Russia will not experience another Mikhail Gorbachev interested in building bridges with the West, in relaxing the state’s control over society, in engaging with perestroika (e.g. chipping away at oligarchy and cronyism), or in celebrating glasnost (e.g. criticizing Putin, halting disinformation campaigns), any time soon.

As for protests, we cannot say there will be more or fewer protests than before. We mentioned earlier in this article that we are not fatalists: we do believe in humanity and in the sacred ability of individuals to make choices. We do not purport that Putinism will absolutely take over every nook of Russian society. In fact, we recognize that as totalitarianism heightens, more individuals are bound to apostatize. We just do not believe that a Manichean society such as Putin’s Russia—which specializes in taking insults to Russia personally, in labeling entire groups of people as either allies or enemies, and in frothing up patriotic zeal via state-controlled information outlets—will provide fruitful ground for the growth of an efficacious opposition

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<sup>22</sup> Vladimir Tismaneanu, “Who Was Yuri Andropov? Ideologue, Policeman, Apparatchik,” *Front Page Magazine*, 18 August 2014. Accessed 1 July 2020 at <https://archives.frontpagemag.com/fpm/who-was-yuri-andropov-ideologue-policeman-vladimir-tismaneanu/>.

soon. Stunts like the July constitutional referendum tap into the conservative element of the Russian majority. They motivate them to act out of fear and belief in their own superiority. Similar to the escalating polarization process seen in the United States as of late, the sustained presence and successes of Putinism will make believers all the more rabid against that which challenges their mode of existence, i.e. a thoroughly Russian, Putinist nation-state. Unfortunately for now, protestors will deepen the existing divide between anti-Putinists and Putinists without winning over nearly enough defectors. Although political protests in Russia could increase in quantity and even quality over the next sixteen years, we doubt that they will achieve change at the national level. Relatedly, it is not as though the most famous oppositionists on the scene now, like Alexei Navalny, can be trusted to stand for democracy, plurality, multiculturalism, or human rights. They might just offer a milder, more personal version of Putinism and exclusionary nationalism. Who knows, until a sincere, captivating protest movement arises within Russia's battered and shrunken civil society? Even in the most unlikely event of a successful coup led by genuine democratic dissidents, we cannot expect Russia to heal quickly. The country will nevertheless be mired in centuries of emotional and psychological anti-liberalism. The road ahead is long and dark. Maybe, just maybe, as younger bureaucrats and oligarchs replace the entrenched "Old Putinist Guard" bureaucrats and oligarchs over the next few decades, and as Putinist economic promises remain unfulfilled, Russia could flirt with a slow, cumbersome twist away from totalitarian democracy. But this will not happen until Putin's shadow fades from public consciousness. And that process itself will take much time, considering how Russia continues to commemorate Stalin, its most dictatorial leader, nearly seventy years after his death.

#### RUSSIA'S ENDURING FANTASY OF SALVATION

Russia's greatest hope of lethally smashing its salvationist fantasy of Putinism is revolution. We asseverate that the meteorology of revolutions is highly unpredictable by nature. A social explosion conceivably might occur in Russia's foreseeable future. In order to create the conditions for this kind of paradigmatic shift, the future revolutionaries will require agency,

unity, structure, and opportunity. A diverse array of social groups and individuals alike must be roused to revolt, at the same time, with some threshold of determination and consciousness. Unfortunately, Putinism is deft at occluding these elements and possibilities from its citizenry, as we have previously established. It was not for nothing that Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci deemed Russian civil society to be atomized and “gelatinous,” after all.<sup>23</sup> Even if average Russians managed to squeeze through the government’s controlling tactics and take to the streets, their actions alone still would not be sufficient enough to destroy Putinism. Revolution is needed to topple a hydra-like salvationist fantasy, and revolutions themselves need agency and structure of opportunity. Vladimir Lenin, in all his revolutionary genius and monstrosity, grasped this concept well. He knew that most crucial to the formation of such an opportunity structure is the moment where those at the top realize they cannot continue to rule in the same old manner, *and* those at the bottom realize they cannot take the weight of the authoritarian behemoth any longer.<sup>24</sup>

The failure of the government to cloak its repressive policies in a comforting shroud of competent, long-term progress; the appearance of cracks in the foundation of the elites’ confidence in their own authoritarian methods; the accumulation of offenses that tips the balance just so and triggers the population’s will to act; the cooperation of a diverse array of socioeconomic classes, from the poor and powerless to the rich and powerful, in protest against the current system of rule: each of these factors combine to potentially open the door to a revolutionary situation that invites a critical mass of support. As of the summer of 2020, we do not observe evidence for the existence of such revolutionary conditions. Neither are we presented with clues that inspire belief in their nascent potentials, at least not in the near future. Sure, some tens of thousands of Russian citizens in the far eastern city of Khabarovsk admonished the federal government’s sacking, replacement, and arrest of regional governor Sergei Furgal in July 2020, publicly protesting for several weeks on end against the Putin

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<sup>23</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), pp. 235-238.

<sup>24</sup> Vladimir I. Lenin, “The Collapse of the Second International,” 1915. Accessed 2 August 2020 at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/csi/ii.htm>.

administration's attempt to re-assert political control over a region notorious for its preference of the far-right Liberal Democratic Party, rather than for Putin's ruling United Russia.<sup>25</sup> But for many reasons, the Furgal protests should be taken with a large grain of salt. Among those reasonings behind our doubtfulness is the Russian state-controlled media's virtual blackout on the event, which prevents the larger national population from learning the unbiased, basic facts of the protests; the relatively remote location of the protests, all of which are far from Moscow, the country's bastion of power, and other politically significant locales; the paucity of participation from influential individuals, groups, political parties, and social movements; the knowledge that the "oppositionist" Liberal Democratic Party is quite nationalist and xenophobic itself; and the protestors' focus on anti-Putin rhetoric, rather than anti-Putinist rhetoric. Thus, we aver little credence in the Furgal protests' capacity, or desire, to spark revolution against Putinism as a political system.

In many ways, we understand the Furgal protests, and the majority of other protests that have occurred in the last two decades of Russian history, to be par for the Putinist course. Because ideological authoritarianism is designed to forcibly shape popular opinions, beliefs, and desires, it will take serious and unmistakable commitment, shared across a wide array of societal forces, to the fight for genuine change before a protest becomes a capable movement in Russia. And because ideological authoritarianism is repressive and seeks omniscience, we know that the revolution-phobic, alienating, Putinist nation-state is constantly vigilant for threats to its survival. Putin's Russia is more than prepared to identify and contain signs of serious ideological disillusionment that might carry the potential to develop into an anti-regime movement. In other words, the prospects for revolution in Russia's near future are low, considering the government's keen supervision, the people's lack of moral outrage and will to action, and the gelatinous nature of Russian civil society.

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<sup>25</sup> Andrew Higgins, "Defying Kremlin, Protesters Stage Biggest Rally Yet in Russian Far East," *New York Times*, 18 July 2020. Accessed 5 August 2020 at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/18/world/russian-protests.html>.

What is most dampening is that, should a revolutionary situation overcome these monumental (albeit surmountable) obstacles to formation, there is still no guarantee that revolution will ensue.<sup>26</sup> Neither is it ensured that this revolution will be genuine and strong enough to triumph, nor that it will engrain freedom, plurality, and rule of law if it does succeed. Without revolution, a fantasy of salvation like Putinism will not crumble. Even if Russia's totalitarianism begins to disintegrate of its own accord after Putin, the population nevertheless will need to stand together against Putinism in order to vanquish it. Revolution, then, is Russia's best avenue to emancipation. Yet a series of structural, cultural, and ideological constraints, methodically engineered by Putinism and centuries of fear-mongering authoritarianism, stand in the way of its assemblage, in the first place.

Though plenty of pundits have likened the July 2020 referendum to the March 1991 referendum that ended up accelerating the Soviet Union's collapse months later, we urge extreme caution around these unrealistic revolutionary hopes for all the reasons outlined above.<sup>27</sup> Russian history may be full of repetitive events and themes, but fantasies of salvation like Putinism are durable. Regardless of the exact path that Russia takes between now and 2036, and barring the most unlikely event of revolution, we forecast that the country will continue to be authoritarian, anti-Western, exclusionary, conservative, and nationalistic. Assuming Putin stays in good enough health, he will surely remain in power for nearly 37 consecutive years, from 1999 to 2036, and perhaps beyond. He will usurp Stalin's title as the longest-ruling leader of Russia since the eighteenth century.

Putin, along with any other emergent leaders in the Kremlin, will perpetuate the narrative that theirs is a glorious country, at the same time as they silence dissenters. As we have increasingly observed over the last two decades, the media, public educational institutions, Russian

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<sup>26</sup> Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Fantasies of Salvation: Democracy, Nationalism, and Myth in Post-Communist Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 195-203.

<sup>27</sup> Oksana Antonenko, "Kennan Cable No. 55: Winning the Referendum and Losing Legitimacy in Putin's Russia," The Kennan Institute of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, July 2020. Accessed 23 July 2020 at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-55-winning-referendum-and-losing-legitimacy-putins-russia>.

Orthodox Church, and loyal citizens will mirror that version of reality spun by the national administration, reproducing it in their own ways. Over the next sixteen years, Russia will continue to strive toward its fantasy of statolatric Weltanschauung, one that in principle has not changed since the ninth century. Perhaps Putin's Russia will even be in a better position to achieve some of its goals in the catastrophic wake of Donald Trump's presidency, and of a global order rattled by a microscopic virus particle. The irony is that, so long as Putin, his crony oligarchs and bureaucrats, and their protégés remain in power—and so long as the revolutionary impulse remains dormant—we can maintain with utmost certainty that Russia will never achieve any kind of glory other than as the epitome of a latter-day authoritarianism.

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