

IS PUTIN'S REGIME BECOMING MORE LIKE BREZHNEV'S?

SOME SIMILARITIES & DIFFERENCES

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Abstract: On September 24, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin made clear that he would run again for the presidency. This news and the speculation leading up to it provoked a rash of comparisons in the Russian media between Putin and Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet leader from 1964 until his death in 1982. Their personalities, methods of rule, and the outcomes of their tenure—or, in Putin's case, predicted outcomes—stood at the center of the analyses. This essay aims to flesh out these comparisons in broad brush-strokes, presenting my own views alongside those of Russian commentators. This comparison is important because it helps to shed light on the future of the Putinist system.

The journalist Nikolai Troitsky reacted to a July 29, 2011, Reuters report speculating that Putin was about to announce his candidacy with an article entitled “Putin is the Brezhnev of Today.”¹ In addition to the fact that both leaders came to power and restored order in the wake of the chaotic regimes of their predecessors Khrushchev and Yeltsin, Troitsky held that: “The main thing they have in common is their philosophy, world-view,

¹ The author is grateful to Robert Otto for his insights and his bibliographical assistance.

and mentality, the essence of which is that in Russia nothing should be changed. More exactly, order must be restored, but then let everything proceed as before, without reforms, without wild leaps, without upheavals Let everyone steal and filch from top to bottom, let corruption penetrate everything: nothing can be done about all that. Doing anything would require upsetting the system, and that would be dangerous, harmful, and destructive. Yes, progress is slowly and quietly proceeding, but God preserve us from any substantive modernizations or innovations.”²

Putin’s declaration of September 24 that he would run again provoked an escalation of such discussions. Since he’d already been in power for 12 years, and could now be headed for two more 6-year terms, his total number of years as Russia’s ruler might reach 24. This would be six years longer than the 18-year rule of Brezhnev, who, in the 1970s, had seemed to be depressingly immortal.

In this context, during a TV program on October 5, Putin’s press secretary Dmitri Peskov admitted: “It’s true that many people are talking about the Brezhnevization of Putin But you know, Brezhnev is not a negative figure in the history of our country; he’s an enormously positive one. He laid the foundations of the economy, of agriculture, and so on.” In an eloquent reply to these claims, an anonymous editorialist on the critically inclined website *gazeta.ru* interpreted the new PR ploy on Putin’s behalf as presenting the following false message: “Brezhnev does not represent stagnation (*zastoi*), nor ‘an economy that’s addicted to oil,’ nor the suffocating atmosphere of dogmatism, nor the political gerontocratism of the authorities that led to the Afghan fiasco, but, rather, he represents political stability and a calm and steady development.” As for Putin in today’s real world, the writer went on, he “is returning to power to be president of the essentially Soviet majority of the population, people who live in an economic and political environment that differs little from that of the Brezhnev era.” For these people, he is presented as their “only hope and support.” The Brezhnev-created illusion that “nothing will ever be changed, nothing will ever disrupt the status quo” is exactly the same message that “will be drilled into the Russian people now.”³

The fact that Putin soon rejected the comparison between himself and Brezhnev, preferring to be compared to Franklin Roosevelt, who was elected president four times, did not deter the critics. Nor did his claims, first that “If two or three incorrect steps are taken, then all this [the horrors of the 1990s that he had just enumerated] could once again rain down

² See Nikolai Troitsky. “Putin—eto Brezhnev segodnya.” *Ekho Moskv* blog. July 30, 2011, www.echo.msk.ru/blog/troitsky/797783-echo/, accessed March 2, 2012.

³ “Delu Brezhneva verny: Simvolom novogo prezidentstva Putina stanet geroi anekdotov.” *Gazeta.ru*. October 5, 2011. At http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2011/10/05_e_3790830.shtml, accessed March 2, 2011.

on the country,” and therefore, second, his re-election as an experienced former president was essential.⁴

This article will now analyze and compare, briefly and somewhat schematically, the Brezhnev and Putin systems. First I'll examine key components of the Soviet regime in the period from the early 1970s until 1985, i.e., including three post-Brezhnev years, and how they stagnated. To link the two time periods highlighted in this article, a few remarks will follow on the Soviet implosion of 1985-91 and then on the nature of Yeltsin's rule. The discussion will then move to how Putin's system—along with needed changes like firming up Russia's macro-economy and reasserting Moscow's grip on the regions—tended to develop the more retrograde features of Yeltsin's rule, and thus to become increasingly Brezhnevite in certain key, though not all, aspects of its political behavior. Finally, I'll try to answer the question: is the Putin system today more or less vulnerable to collapse than the Soviet system was in the late 1980s?

I. Key Features of the Late Soviet Regime

How should we define Brezhnev's rule?

In the broadest terms, Brezhnev's rule was a comprehensively authoritarian system, with some totalitarian features that weakened in their influence over time. Among these I would emphasize two. First, the comprehensive, monopolistic, teleological, and utopian ideology of Marxism-Leninism permeated the entire Soviet system. It steadily declined in credibility, and thus also in its ability to mobilize the elite and the population behind the Kremlin's goals. In other words, state capacity declined.

Second, I would highlight the ideology's imperative that the USSR should actively seek to convert the whole world to communism. Here, thanks to the declining credibility of Marxism-Leninism, the anti-communist revolts in Eastern Europe, and the largely successful resistance of the Western world to Soviet expansion, the imperative for Soviet foreign policy changed. With some exceptions in Africa and Asia, it became, in practice, largely defensive in nature, mainly concerned to shore up the status quo in Cuba, Eastern Europe, and Afghanistan.

What were the main features of the governing institutions in the late Soviet period?

The leadership of the Communist Party (CPSU) was a self-selecting oligarchy. A key oligarch was chosen to be the chairman, who balanced

⁴ See extracts from a Putin interview, “Vladimir Putin schitaet sebya skoree Ruzvel'tom, chem Brezhnev.” *Newru.com*. October 17, 2011, <http://www.newsru.com/russia/17oct2011/interview.html>, accessed March 2, 2011.

the factions, and mediated between them, and, occasionally, if gridlock persisted over time, resolved disputes by deciding what to do.

The party leadership was remarkable for the continuity of its membership. Brezhnev and others were at the top for 18 or more years, sometimes until they died. In effect, the leadership became a gerontocracy and this continuity was only slightly less marked at lower levels of the political hierarchy. The leaders' high priority was to keep all members of the elite at all levels happy, and to maintain political stability at all costs.

All the USSR's political, judicial, economic, military, and security institutions were controlled, quite effectively, by a powerful hierarchy of committees, the apparatus of the CPSU, that paralleled and supervised the governmental apparatus.

What supports did the system have?

In this tight, centrally organized system, the elites had a clear collective incentive to support and preserve the status quo. Ordinary Soviet people, too, had a stake in the status quo, in that they enjoyed full employment and fairly comprehensive, state-provided welfare, although it's true that social mobility noticeably declined in the Brezhnev era.

Also, a new type of actor, dissident groups, emerged in the late 1960s, that did not support the system. Rather, they demanded more political, national, religious, or social freedom, and also the freedom to emigrate, to form free labor unions, and so on. But most of these groups were initially quite small, and, at first, the KGB could suppress them to the degree needed.

What weaknesses appeared in the system?

In broad terms, two weaknesses appeared—the onset of economic, political, and military stagnation (*zastoi*) at home, and, in the Soviet empire abroad—imperial overstretch and popular rebellions in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Afghanistan. These rebellions resulted in the USSR being diplomatically isolated for considerable periods, and even subjected to economic and other boycotts. The causes of these developing weaknesses included, first, an ideology that was exposed as lacking realism, in part by the general *zastoi*, and in part by the greater political and economic dynamism of the West, and the West's more successful modernization of its armed forces.

The weaknesses were also caused by a sluggish economy with a declining growth rate, by a failing agriculture, and by a military industry that was losing its dynamism while consuming enormous resources. Underlying all this was a wasteful system of state ownership and central planning that lacked effective incentives and was inimical to innovation.

Additional causes included an aging and inadequate or incompetent leadership in most spheres; rising corruption among the elites, and their growing but largely frustrated desire to have easy access to the outside world; the failures and ultimate defeat of the Soviet military in Afghanistan; and the rise of dissident nationalist movements, especially in Ukraine, the Baltic, and the Caucasus. These movements were resilient and gradually mobilized nationalism against communism.

II. The Gorbachev and Post-Soviet Era

In 1985, Gorbachev's group saw the chronic *zastoi* and the country's international isolation as leading the USSR into a dead-end. So it embraced radical change.

However, Gorbachev's embrace of western models and the sudden abandonment of political authoritarianism, central planning, and knee-jerk hostility to the West released an array of political forces in the USSR that, ultimately, the Gorbachev leadership could not control. To the surprise of the great majority of Western Sovietologists, in 1991 the USSR broke up and communist rule collapsed. These scholars had been influenced by books like the volume *After Brezhnev*, published in 1983 on the basis of a major research project. Its editor Robert Byrnes wrote that all 35 participants agreed that "there is no likelihood whatsoever that the Soviet Union will collapse in the foreseeable future."⁵

The experts had not paid enough attention to the regime's above-listed weaknesses or to the brilliant little book written back in 1969 by the dissident Russian historian Andrei Amalrik, who argued convincingly that collapse was inevitable. The book was called "Will the Soviet Union Survive until 1984?"

From 1991 to 1999, Boris Yeltsin led independent Russia on a contradictory path. He encouraged democratization, but he also negated it by introducing a Constitution with extensive presidential powers, by personalizing too much of the decision-making process, and by appointing as successive prime ministers in 1998-1999 three representatives of the security and police services. Also, he effected very little turnover in the political elite. Virtually no one was removed from the elite, and only a rather small number of fresh faces were added, including, as his rule went on, a noticeable contingent of *siloviki*. Also, through his privatization programs, Yeltsin deepened class divisions. He created a perverted form of capitalism and a group of super-rich oligarchs, some of whom he allowed to play roles in his government. Finally, he hand-picked as his successor a veteran of the KGB, Vladimir Putin.

⁵ R. Byrnes, ed. 1983. *After Brezhnev*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, xvii.

III. Putin's Russia

Yeltsin's activities ultimately laid the foundations for the ascent under Putin of hundreds of former KGB officers into senior government positions and big business. Once again, as in the early 1990s, virtually no one was removed from the existing political elite. The intake of ex-secret police officers was simply added to it. Thus in the whole post-Soviet period no significant social turnover has taken place, let alone any social revolution of the sort that Theda Skocpol analyzed.⁶

Indeed, in some ways the Yeltsin and Putin regimes have represented a continuation of the Soviet period. For example, the same or similar people as ruled the Soviet system have been ruling the country since 1991. Not surprisingly, therefore, although today's institutions have different names, many features of Russian political behavior do not differ much from the behavior of the Brezhnev period, as I'll try to show in this section. I'll also mention some differences.

How should we characterize today's Putin system?

First, in politics, Putin presides over not a comprehensive authoritarianism, but, rather, a mild to medium form of authoritarianism. Some elements of electoral democracy, pluralism, civil society, and respect for human rights exist, but they are not guaranteed by the courts, whose theoretical independence is, in practice, weak.

Second, in economics, Russia has a mostly private, but state-dominated capitalist system, in which corruption and criminality feature much more prominently than they did in the Soviet economy. Also, unlike the latter, today's economic system is largely, though not completely, integrated into the world economy.

Let me now look at some of today's governing institutions more closely. Russia's core inner leadership is now, as in Soviet times, a self-selecting oligarchy. In this highly secret group, I deduce from available evidence that a key leader, currently Putin, is chosen to be the chairman, who balances the factions, and mediates between them, and, occasionally, if gridlock persists over time, resolves disputes by deciding what to do.

Other features of the leadership—as less narrowly construed—include the striking continuity of its membership—Putin and other key figures have been at the top for 10-12 years. This continuity is only slightly less marked at the second level of the political hierarchy, though much less marked at lower levels. And, the leaders assign a high priority to keeping all members of the elite at all levels happy, and to maintaining stability at almost any cost, i.e., the status quo in the distribution of political and

⁶ See, e.g., Theda Skocpol. 1976. "France, Russia, China: A Structural Analysis of Social Revolutions." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 18: 2.

economic power.

The similarities to the leadership features under the Brezhnev system are remarkable. Russia's political, judicial, military, media, and security institutions, are all controlled—with widely varying effectiveness—by the Presidential Administration (PA), the relevant ministries, and the offices of the president's commissioners in the eight federal regions or okrugs. For instance, the PA decides what should appear on the main TV stations, and how much money should be given to each of the approved political parties, and who should occupy the main positions in them. The parties then become the regime's transmission belts (to use a term applied to similar processes in the Soviet era) to get the draft legislation of the PA or the government smoothly adopted by the Duma. This parallel with the Soviet system emphasizes the fact that the Soviet and post-Soviet political systems both imitate democracy, i.e., have democratic façades, while lacking a democratic essence.

We should note here that while today's system of the PA and other bodies controlling the work of subordinate institutions works quite well in the examples just given, in general it is much less efficient than the highly disciplined CPSU apparatus was in the Soviet period. For example, the MVD and FSB have been very poorly controlled. Putin's system lacks cohesion in many respects, not least in the regions.

Third, regarding control of the economy, unlike in Soviet times the invisible hand of the market has played a significant role. But so too have the institutions just mentioned, which have often perverted the workings of the market. Especially important is the government's specialized financial monitoring agency (Rosfinmonitoring). This digs up information on the tricks used by corporations and other organizations to conceal their real profits and their illegal activities. If necessary, this information is then used to persuade or blackmail the corporations concerned into doing whatever the Putin leadership wants from them (for reasons of balancing, personal greed, or favoritism). For example, the Kremlin might want a corporation to surrender an asset to A or B at a low price, or to donate money to the charitable fund of organization X or Y, an organization that may be attached to a government body and therefore be controlled by officials.⁷ This sort of manipulation was much less common and sophisticated in Soviet times.⁸

⁷ In St. Petersburg, for example, Dmitri Mikhal'chenko runs (from an office next-door to the FSB's infamous Kresty prison) an organization called "The Administrative Division of the Regional Civic Foundation to Support the FSB and the SVR of the RF." This organization receives donations, e.g., from businessmen keen to please the FSB and SVR, and makes grants to these official bodies.

⁸ The only clear and systematic account I know of the routine, covert corruption of the middle to late Brezhnev system, and of the opportunities it gave for further financial manipulations, is by the Soviet insider and defector Mikhail Voslensky. 1984. *Nomenklatura: The Soviet*

To sum up this section, Putin's system of rule has now become, in my opinion, sufficiently different from Yeltsin's in 1999, to justify calling it a distinctively Putinist system. However, it is not radically different, as it grew out of the authoritarian and elite-corrupting trends of the Yeltsin period. Some of its perversions are in essence extreme forms of some of those trends that were facilitated by the remarkable rise in oil prices from 2004 to 2008, which sent Russian corruption through the roof.

What support does the Putin system enjoy?

The elites in this centrally organized system have a clear collective incentive to support and preserve the status quo, since almost all economic and political power is in their hands. Ordinary Russians, too, have a stake in the status quo, because their standard of living has, until recently, gone steadily up under Putin, their wages and pensions have been paid on time, and, unlike in Soviet times, the authorities have not in general intruded into their daily lives.

These points have tended to offset the fact that social mobility has been going down under Putin, and, from 2008 through January 2011, unemployment climbed in disturbing ways, before turning down again. However, support for the system from both the elites and ordinary Russians has declined since the events of December 2011, which are discussed in the next section.

Factors that are weakening the Putin system

First, having been in power for twelve years, Putin, as Russia's dominant leader (khozyain) and a skilled politician and manipulator, has recently been losing a significant proportion of his power and influence. This was confirmed by the rather poor performance of Unified Russia in the Duma elections of December 4, 2011, and, more dramatically, by: the massive anti-Putin demonstrations of up to 100,000 people that followed in Moscow; by the smaller demonstrations that took place in some 80 other cities and towns; and later by a further round of similar demonstrations on February 4, 2012. The crowds protested against Putin's decision to run again for the presidency, against his failure to modernize Russia's economy and political system, and against the manipulation of elections and the falsification of their results under his leadership.

Another reason for Putin's decline was the gradual emergence in 2010-2011 of a stream of publications detailing some of his personal corruption that he has hitherto kept hidden. This is one of the reasons why

Ruling Class, New York: Doubleday. Since this book is not well translated and the original manuscript was in Russian, a much better version for scholars is the second Russian edition of 1990, which was updated by the author, 1990. *Nomenklatura: Gospodstvuyushchiy klass*. London: Overseas Publications Interchange. Unlike the English edition, however, it does not have an index.

placards and chants at demonstrations proclaimed slogans such as "Putin is a thief!" All this weakened Putin personally and the Putinist system too, since the system, like the Soviet system, requires a leader with an aura of natural command and invincibility. Putin's aura was decisively punctured in December 2011, and as a result thoughtful Russians suddenly saw a variety of possible future developments opening up.⁹

We should note here that Putin's political clout had been declining well before December 2011. As the oppositionist Vladimir Milov pointed out in October 2011, Putin had for some time been losing touch with Russian realities and making political mistakes. One symptom of the incipient splintering of his political base¹⁰ was his decision to allow his long-time ally Aleksei Kudrin to be dismissed and humiliated by President Medvedev. (Later, he watched Kudrin become increasingly sympathetic to the liberal opposition.) Another symptom of Putin's loss of touch, as noted by Milov, was his proclamation of the goal of creating a Eurasian Union.¹¹ This was designed in part to bring the Central Asian states closer to Russia, a change that would, Milov pointed out, facilitate the migration of Central Asian workers into Russia. The fact that the announcement came at a time when an increasing number of Russians were publicly protesting such migration showed that Putin had a tin ear. Also, Milov argued, while Putin's planned resumption of the presidency did indeed signal a deliberate return to a Brezhnev-like stagnation, it was not a sign of Putin's strength. On the contrary, he said, "before us stands a man who has grown complacent during the years when he could do what he wanted . . . , who long ago lost the ability to understand his own country, who doesn't know how to communicate with it except through staged TV shows . . . , and who at the start of his campaign is making mistakes that would disqualify a beginner."¹² While Milov's rhetoric was sweeping, its essential accuracy was suggested by Putin's bewilderment when faced by the unprecedented events that unfolded two months later.

A second development that has weakened Putin's system is the

⁹ See the varied views of a dozen experts in the period between the two big Moscow demonstrations of December 2011, *Zavtra*. The New Times No. 42, December 12, 2011. They discuss how the authorities will act toward the rising public protests, what the opposition should do, and what the current demonstrations will lead to.

¹⁰ Other symptoms that should be noted have been Putin's dismissal of his crony Viktor Cherkesov in 2008 and Cherkesov's re-emergence as an oppositionist in the Communist Party, and also the increasing distance between Putin and long-standing allies like Anatoly Chubais.

¹¹ Note that this seemingly impractical plan, with its preservationist and restorationist goals of preserving ties and re-creating the USSR in a looser form, recalls Brezhnev's efforts to preserve the Soviet empire by shoring it up in Czechoslovakia (1968), Poland (1980-81), and Afghanistan (1979-1988).

¹² V. Milov. "Ne nado boyat'sya Putina." *Vedomosti*. October 13, 2011. At www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/news/1391410/bez_pyati_minut_pensioner#ixzz1ae3TAWs7, accessed March 2, 2012.

fact that while the return of capitalism to Russia made the economy more dynamic, it also created capitalists, many of whom are very rich. Initially, in 2000-2004, Putin managed to limit their involvement in politics. However, in recent years some of them have been financing liberal and other oppositionist publications and websites, mostly surreptitiously. These are the outlets that have been publishing the exposes of his corruption. As these capitalists see Putin's position declining, his ability to thwart their growing political influence is also declining.

As Yulia Latynina recently wrote, under totalitarianism everyone has to work for the Leader, but "under a kleptocracy (of the Putin type) everyone works for himself."¹³ I would add that this motivation of self-reliance leads logically regarding the oligarchs to their creating or controlling informal and then more formal groups and/or parties to promote the interests of themselves and their associates. Recent examples have been the Medvedev-related Institute of Contemporary Development (INSOR), headed by Igor Yurgens; the Center for Strategic Planning, directed by an associate of economic liberals like Anatoly Chubais and Mikhail Dmitriev; and the political projects of the unpredictable oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov.

Especially notable in the field of economic and political publications have been the articles of Dmitriev. His powerful essay of October 20, 2011, presented a picture of an economy weighed down by stagnation, and laid out the urgency of economic and political modernization in the national interest. In doing so, he appealed directly to the political forces that favored this course to work hard to produce pro-reform outcomes in the upcoming elections to the Duma and the presidency.¹⁴

Dmitriev also pointed out that the recently announced intention of Putin and Medvedev to exchange positions following the March 2012 presidential election would further undermine the democratic representation of political opinion in Russia. As a result of this, however, with public opinion rapidly evolving, Dmitriev held that "the chances of speeding up the political transformation are not declining, but growing." At the same time, the Putin-Medvedev tandem had been falling in the polls and "the authorities find themselves isolated in the face of the potential social discontent and will not be able to effectively resist it." Dmitriev summed up his argument like this: "The situation is becoming more liable to explode. During the first eight months of 2011 a poll showed that the readiness of people to take part in protest actions grew on average by one fifth compared to the

¹³ Yulia Latynina. "Bol'shinstvo tekhn, kto golosoval protiv PZhiV, ne chitali Naval'nogo, ne uzhasalis' proisshestviyu na Leninskom prospekte. U kazhdogo iz nikh sluchilsia kakoi-to svoi personalniy Leninskiy prospekt." *Novaya Gazeta*. Dec 6, 2011, At www.novayagazeta.ru/columns/49903.html, accessed March 2, 2012.

¹⁴ M. Dmitriev. "Voshli v stadiyu samorazrusheniya." *Vedomosti*. October 20, 2011, At www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/news/1397603/kradenoe_solnce#ixzz1blnfOSEM, accessed March 2, 2012.

same period in 2010, and reached 40%.” Moreover, “According to several reports, in September the growth in the number of large-scale workplace conflicts grew many times compared with the relatively stable level of previous months.” Dmitriev concluded with a bold prediction: “In these circumstances, talk of the stability of the political system will have to be abandoned. The time for deep changes is approaching.” Six weeks later, for the first time, mass demonstrations across Russia demanded changes of this sort.

We should note here that Putin does not encourage the sort of public discussion of Russia's national interests that the demonstrators have tried to stimulate. He and his associates are so focused on promoting their private interests that the national interest does not much concern them. All this reduces state capacity and threatens the future of Putin's system.

In addition to financing critical publications, capitalists can move their capital around. In this regard, the situation in Russia at the end of 2011 was alarming. According to official figures, capital flight during the year amounted to a remarkable \$84.2 billion.¹⁵ Thus adequate domestic and foreign investment in Russia's planned modernization programs had not materialized. Moreover, the state budget could not help much. It was already stretched by declining income from oil and gas exports, and would probably be further stretched by Putin's promises to increase pensions, wages, and defense spending, promises designed to improve his chances of being re-elected president in March 2012.

Let me now mention briefly some further factors of weakness in Putin's system—beyond the two main ones discussed above. The third factor is his “party of power,” Unified Russia. This has proved to be so corrupt that the description of it as “The Party of Swindlers and Thieves” by the dissident Aleksei Navalny has gained wide currency. It has little popular legitimacy.

Fourth, unlike the Soviet Union, Putin's Russia does not have a national ideology, except for an amorphous patriotism and a Putin-promoted nostalgia for Soviet times. These attitudes cannot mobilize the population and are of little political use.

Without some agreed national values or principles of government (the Constitution enjoys little respect), Putin's regime will have no anchor in the sort of economic and political storms that are likely to confront it in the coming years.

Fifth, there is no national agreement about the desirable size of Russia's territory. Some Russian imperialists would like to expand the country by incorporating some or all of the Baltics, Belarus, Ukraine, and Georgia. By contrast, other people, including increasingly vocal

¹⁵ This compared to \$33.6 billion in 2010. For statistics of this sort go to the site of the Russian Central Bank, At www.cbr.ru/statistics.

ethnic Russian nationalists, would like the Kremlin to get rid of the North Caucasus on the grounds that it is too Muslim, too prone to practice terrorism, and generally too non-Russian.

Finally, Russia faces some serious social problems ranging from demographic decline, increasing drug use, and chronic alcoholism to the brain drain of bright young people leaving the country. True, some intelligent commentators see such trends—features of the Brezhnev period as well as the present—as strengthening, not weakening Putin’s system. Yuliya Latynina, for example, argues that for the Putinites “modernization is not desirable, because it would impede the maximizing of (the leaders’) personal power. Desirable is a general lumpenization, desirable is the destruction of the intellectual business elite that is capable of taking decisions independently of the authorities.” She concludes, “We must understand what the strategy of the authorities is, ‘Okay, everyone is emigrating—that’s just fine’.”¹⁶

IV. Is Putin’s System as Vulnerable as the USSR Was to Potential Collapse?

In conclusion, the above far-from-exhaustive list of weaknesses—when compared to my list of Brezhnev-era Soviet weaknesses—inclines me to see Putin’s system as probably more vulnerable to decline and eventual collapse than the USSR was. (What might come after the Putin system is of course impossible to predict.)

Let me note here that this system may survive beyond Putin’s departure. Also, Putin might, out of desperation, try to stay in power by turning his system towards a more thoroughgoing authoritarianism (which in my view would be unlikely to work).

But neither of these contingencies changes my opinion about the probably fatal structural vices of Putinism. Most strikingly, Putinism increasingly lacks effective governing institutions of both the virtual and the material type. With, as noted above, a Constitution that commands little respect and no “national idea,” Russia’s institutions are, with the partial exceptions of the army and the Orthodox Church, unanchored and increasingly lacking in legitimacy.

By comparison, the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the Brezhnev period, however desiccated it became in the 1970s and 1980s, was still believed in to some degree by a significant proportion of the population. Thus, it provided support to Soviet institutions, until, in the late 1980s, these were undermined or emasculated by Gorbachev. Even then, some people continued to embrace Marxism-Leninism. In 1993 they flocked to

¹⁶ Yulia Latynina. “Kod dostupa.” *Ekho Moskvy*. October 1, 2011, transcript at www.echo.msk.ru/programs/cpde/816625-echo/, accessed October 5, 2012.

support the newly created Communist Party of the Russian Federation, a party that, to this day, wins some 10-20% of the popular vote in national elections.

As for the institutions that made the Soviet system reasonably cohesive, if far from efficient, the three most important ones were the Communist Party apparatus, its subordinate but intimately related guardian of political security, the KGB, and the ministerial system that ran the economy. Today, by contrast, the closest thing to a ruling party is Unified Russia, a group of corrupt bureaucrats who, as noted above, are wholly dependent on the Kremlin and fear that they could be cast aside at any time. They are responsible only for limited personnel work and for using the extensive "administrative resources" given them by the Kremlin to organize and win elections in their areas. This party is a reed so weak that it cannot even begin to be compared with the CPSU.

As for political security, today's FSB can perhaps bear some comparison with the fairly efficient KGB. But its effectiveness is enormously inferior. Above all, it is riven with corruption from top to bottom, and has no CPSU or equivalent party monitoring and directing it at each level. It cannot therefore, as the KGB usually could, be relied on by the political leaders to carry out orders quickly and efficiently. Also, it now attracts recruits of much lower caliber than the KGB did in Soviet times, and morale in its ranks is poor. In addition, it has been headed since 1991 by a succession of nine weak, ineffective, or short-term leaders, notably the pedestrian Putin crony Nikolai Patrushev from 1999 to 2008.

Thus, today's Russia possesses no integrating, unifying institution like the CPSU, and its security police has been seriously weakened and is poorly monitored. The "vertikal' vlasti" (vertical structure of executive power) that Putin set out in 2000 to create has proved to be ineffective, if not, in practice, a myth.

As for the economy, in theory the hidden hand of the market has, in most respects, replaced the ministerial system. However, in practice the political leaders and senior bureaucrats at each level of government exercise a parasitic supervision over Russia's companies, milking them for bribes and punishing owners who refuse to accept the "guidance" provided from above. The effect on companies of this supervision varies from onerous to highly beneficial, depending on the current condition of the myriad, often shifting business ties that exist between the owners on the one side and the politicians and bureaucrats on the other. In sum, the Putin system imposes a bribery tax on the economy, it creates an uneven and unpredictable playing field for insiders and outsiders, its status quo mindset impedes innovation and modernization, and its main means of effective though inadequate control over economic performance is the blunt instrument of macro-economic policy.

As far as ordinary people are concerned, the authorities and the business owners have united to form a fearsome team which, as times turn bad, appears to be planning to squeeze the living standards of the middle and working classes. Thus, compared to their Soviet equivalents in the Brezhnev era, these people, too, lived at first through better material times (in the 2000s), but probably have worse times ahead of them. In addition, Russia's GDP performance will probably follow a trajectory similar to that of the USSR in the late 1970s and the first half of the 1980s. Thus popular discontent will probably rise, along with the discontent of elite elements who see Putinism as reactionary in essence and threatening to their own futures. All this highlights the increasing illegitimacy of the current institutions and informal corrupt practices, and makes the future of Putinism seem cloudy at best and dire at worst. If we compare the resilience of Putinism today with the resilience of the Soviet system in the early 1980s, my hunch is that Putinism is more likely to collapse. While the outcome and after-effects of the presidential election on March 4, 2012, may bring fresh insights, it seems for now that Putinism has fewer strengths and more weaknesses.

Vladimir Shlapentokh, whose opinions I respect, and also the well informed, long-time insider Gleb Pavlovsky have recently argued that the Putin system is more deeply rooted than I think it is. This gives me some pause. In a thoughtful essay that Shlapentokh wrote in November 2011, before the December demonstrations, he said that: "There is no serious opposition in Russia ..., while the political elite is united." "There is no public discontent coming from ordinary Russians.... By encouraging corruption and providing immunity from prosecution to the corrupted people, Putin created a powerful social base that will help him resist attempts to change the regime." "Of course," Shlapentokh continued, "negative trends can undermine the regime, creating a basis for the opposition to challenge it with real political actions. Several sudden shocks could also deliver serious and even mortal blows to the regime. In any case, the American government has to expect that the probability of dealing with Putin as the supreme master of Russia is quite high, for at least another decade."¹⁷

Meanwhile, Pavlovsky, a long-time publicist for Putin, then, more briefly, for Medvedev, was less cautious in his judgments than Shlapentokh. While holding in December that the authorities had lost contact with reality, he said that, more importantly, "Russia's system has taken shape over the last 13-15 years, and is very strong. In practice, it cannot be reshaped." Nonetheless, Putin had "dealt it a serious blow when he made the political mistake of deciding to return to the presidency without getting the

¹⁷ V. Shlapentokh. "Putin's Regime: A Firm Future So Far." Johnson's Russia List No. 199, November 3, 2011, item 19.

approval of his support groups. Now he has to repair the damage, because the system has really begun to fall apart.” He must re-consolidate it.” The system, Pavlovsky went on, “is unbelievably solid. It possesses colossal defects, but on the other hand it is highly competitive and well adapted to the world market and globalization. It has a very solid financial base.... The only problem is that it cannot tolerate competitors inside Russia. It has to operate on the world market alone, so it doesn't allow other players—businesses or citizens—to become private owners. It acts in the name of the whole country and capitalizes Russia on its own. This creates a number of problems: we don't have legally secure private property, or legally defensible rights of the individual, or defensible businesses.”¹⁸

Other experienced commentators see the system as being much less strong than do Shlapentokh and Pavlovsky. Lilia Shevtsova, for example, said in October that “a wide range of people belonging to the system realize how fragile the system is.... One of the issues that experts working for the government are seriously discussing today is what year is Russia in, as compared with the Soviet Union—1989, 1990, or 1991? That is, we have pessimism here.”¹⁹ The cautious sociologist Lev Gudkov, head of the Levada polling organization, held in November that “Putin has a maximum of two more years of stability for his system.” Also, the historian, political commentator, and democratic nationalist strategist Valery Solovei reported that the same time span was given to him by his frankest interlocutors in the Kremlin. These individuals added that “events are unfolding too rapidly, significantly faster than seemed to be happening two months ago.” Regarding a time frame, Solovei believed that “big, very big changes will occur in Russia within, probably, a year and a half to three years from now.”²⁰ Ten days after he wrote this, the first mass anti-Putin demonstration took place in Moscow.

Another political analyst of high repute, Igor Klyamkin, in October, viewed the decay of Russian institutions as leading towards a situation in which some of the regions will pull away from the corrupt federal government, and Russia's territorial integrity will be threatened. “What we have now,” he said, “is not an alternative to fragmentation, rather it's the postponement of fragmentation through giving subsidies to people like Kadyrov (the president of Chechnya). If fragmentation is to be avoided—something many people now believe can hardly be achieved, then it

¹⁸ G. Pavlovsky. Interviewed by Svobodnaya Pressa. “Na vyborah russkie regiony skazali ‘My khotim bol'she’.” December 6, 2011, At www.svpressa.ru/society/article/50646/, accessed March 2, 2012.

¹⁹ L. Shevtsova, interview “O smerti tandema”, *Profil*, No. 36, October 3, 2011.

²⁰ V. Solovei. “Rossiya na grani revolyutsii.” *Russkaya Platforma*. November 26, 2011, www.rusplatforma.org/publikacii/node312/. This article quotes the estimate given in this paragraph by Gudkov.

can be done only through a carefully thought out reform of the political system.” For this to happen, a broad public debate would be needed. To date, however, there was no sign of this occurring. In Klyamkin’s view, “Only a deep systemic crisis” can get Russia out of its present situation. “This can’t be avoided. It’s not yet clear who will get us out of the crisis or how, but the longer the system of the president having a monopoly of power lasts, the deeper and more catastrophic the consequences will be.”²¹

In conclusion, the post-Soviet Russian leaders seem to have pursued a strategy similar to that followed by China’s leaders since 1978. As Fang Lizhi recently argued in an eloquent review-article,²² the dual strategy of Deng Xiaoping was, first, to carry out economic reforms that would enormously enrich the ruling elite, and, second, at the same time to block any significant political reform and convince the population that passively settling for these arrangements was a good option and certainly the best they could hope for. This is the path that Yeltsin—from the mid-1990s—and then Putin have followed in Russia, if with markedly less success vis-à-vis public opinion than the Chinese leaders have had.

This line of argument highlights a caveat that needs to be entered regarding comparisons between Brezhnev and Putin. Unlike Deng in China, Brezhnev did not launch reforms designed to lead to a form of capitalism for society’s upper class. On the other hand, however, Brezhnev did quietly promote corruption and more luxurious living among the Soviet elite. And he did—through his determination to preserve the status quo in power relations, to stay in power indefinitely himself, and to pay no more than lip service to the social consequences of such policies—bring about stagnation or *zastoi* in both politics and the economy. From this perspective, comparing him to Putin seems to be a valid exercise. My own conclusion, as noted above, is that Putin’s regime has weaker underpinnings than Brezhnev’s did—in, say, the early 1980s.

²¹ I. Klyamkin. “Lovushka sitemnogo ‘realizma’.” *Ezhednevny Zhurnal*. October 27, 2011, At www.ej.ru/?a=note&id=11426, accessed March 2, 2012.

²² “The Real Deng.” *The New York Review of Books*. November 10, 2011, 8-11. A review of Ezra Vogel’s *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*.