Reading Russia

THE RULES OF SURVIVAL

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In an attempt to explain the Russian Revolution to Lady Ottoline Morrell, British philosopher Bertrand Russell once remarked that Bolshevik despotism, appalling though it was, seemed the right sort of government for Russia. "If you ask yourself how Fyodor Dostoevsky's characters should be governed, you will understand," was his not-so-subtle point. In explaining the recent resurgence of authoritarianism in Russia, most political theorists have abstained from referring to Dostoevsky's novels or Russia's authoritarian political culture. They have a better explanation. It was not "soul," it was "oil." The "oil curse" has replaced the "soul curse" as the most popular explanation for Russia's current state of affairs. High oil prices have been blamed for democracy's failure and Vladimir Putin's consolidation of authoritarian rule. The facts fit. During Putin's time as president from 2000 to 2008, Russian oil and gas companies earned in excess of US$650 billion more from their exports than they had in the previous eight years under Yeltsin. The breakneck pace of economic growth gave Putin a free hand politically, and he used it without compunction to entrench the power of himself and his circle, unhindered by weak and shallow-rooted democratic institutions.

Thus Putin's Russia was conceptualized as a classic "petrostate"—strong and weak at the same time, brutally confident yet potentially vulnerable, and hostile to democracy. This picture of Putin's Russia as an authoritarian oil state attracts many Western analysts because it seems to carry a promise that falling oil prices will bring regime change. What Russian liberals prayed for was economic crisis and cheap oil. Putin's regime, they reasoned, may remain unchallenged as long as it can hand out petrodollars and improve the material well-being of the people, but

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it will be doomed when hard times strike. Putin's centralized, autocratic system cannot deliver good governance and is generally inept at handling crises. Thus, many were convinced that a major economic crisis would force the Kremlin either to open up the system and allow more pluralism and competition, or else fall back on naked repression—a strategy that is self-defeating in the long run.

And now God has heard the liberals' prayers. Oil prices began collapsing in the second half of 2008, and Russia is facing a perfect economic storm. The only question is whether the fall of oil prices will really mean the fall of Putin's regime. Is the current crisis the one that will end Putinism? Is the crisis more dangerous for Russia's new authoritarianism or for Europe's new democracies?

The early evidence of the Putin government's performance in response to falling oil prices supports the assumption that the regime is ineffective, vulnerable, and unprepared to deal with the challenge. There is no doubt that the crisis has hit Russia extremely hard. In the last six months of 2008, industrial output declined by almost 20 percent.[1] Assets that were once liquid are now leaden. The Russian economy was hurt simultaneously by the collapse of the Russian stock market, the sharp dip in commodity prices, and rising outflows of capital fleeing to safer investments beyond Russia's borders. The country's financial reserves are melting like snow in spring.

The social and political fallout of the crisis is dramatic. We can already detect splits among the ruling elites, with some of the Kremlin's in-house oligarchs bleeding and others cheering. Unemployment is rising, and the specter of mass protest has the authorities gravely worried. The degree of their fear may be gauged from the Kremlin's decision to send OMON troops from the Interior Ministry to crush protests that broke out in Vladivostok in December 2008, when thousands rallied to denounce a plan to raise the tariff on used foreign cars. The crisis has also sharpened the tensions between Moscow and various regional authorities, and many are hard-pressed to imagine how, given the new economic reality, the Kremlin will be able to continue buying the loyalty of vassals such as Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov. The downturn in the construction industry is expected to throw a million migrant laborers out of work, sparking fears of rising crime and xenophobia.

The Russian government's early reaction to the crisis resembled a nervous rearranging of deckchairs on the Titanic. A Kremlin that for almost a decade had been used to stability and economic growth could not find the words with which to describe the crisis or explain what steps were planned to meet it. The authorities' first impulses were to ban the word "crisis" from government-controlled media and then to focus all efforts on fighting "panic" rather than addressing the underlying economic conditions that were causing it. The result was a decline of trust in the mainstream media. A January 2009 poll taken by

the independent Levada Center showed most Russians feeling doubtful that their government would be able to cope with the crisis.

And yet, at the time of this writing in late February 2009, confidence in Prime Minister Putin and his handpicked successor as president, Dmitri Medvedev, appears to be holding steady at a very high level. In short, Putin's regime is in deep crisis, but at least for the moment Putin's majority remains intact and the consensus behind him is unchallenged. Why this should be so, even though a majority of Russians is well aware of the regime's corruption and its failure to modernize Russia, is a question worth asking. It compels us to explore the factors other than oil that prop up the popularity of the regime and—now that oil wealth is ebbing away—may well determine its chances to survive.

A Tale of Two Crises

Many analysts are tempted to draw comparisons between the current crisis and the Russian financial meltdown of 1998, which destroyed Yeltsin's middle class and signed the death warrant of the imperfect democracy over which he had presided. Will 2008 wreck Putin's project the way 1998 sank Yeltsin's? The analogy is tempting, but misleading. What happened in 1998 was a crisis of Russian capitalism and Russia's mode of faking democracy. While Russia was collapsing, Western democracies were prospering. It was a crisis not of the model, but of the imitation. The current crisis, by contrast, is not particular to Russia, but global. The Russian public sees it as a crisis of the U.S. capitalist model, a model that has been imported into Russia. A decade ago, most Russians viewed Yeltsin's Kremlin as an accomplice in the catastrophe; today, most see Putin's Kremlin as a victim. If the 1998 crisis convinced Russians that they and their elites were sailing in different boats, the present troubles strengthen the regime's message that Russia should seek to control the impact of globalization on its economy and society. In short, the current crisis may be eroding the economic base and the material power base of the regime, but is making its ideological base stronger. Sovereignty—not prosperity—is at the heart of Putin's pact with the Russian people. At the moment, Russians blame Putin not for his ambition to build "fortress Russia," but for his failure to build it quickly enough.

In the view of U.S. political scientist Ken Jowitt, Putin and his cohort are attempting to articulate and consolidate a new Russian political identity, and not simply to enhance and stabilize Russia's state power and their own. They are trying to create a "castle" founded upon state-orchestrated mercantilism and nationalism.[2] This castle is meant to shield Russia from the alien forces of globalization. There is nothing about this project that is irrational, or unique to Russia. The country's neomercantilism aims at allowing Russia to integrate itself into the globalized world without being swallowed by it. The Kremlin

wants to preserve Russia's territorial and cultural integrity even in the midst of what seems, from the Russian point of view, like a process of forced modernization.

The support that this project commands within Russia explains the strong backing that Putin's regime receives, and by the same token accounts for the weakness of the liberal alternative. Russians fear that genuine democratization will end in chaos and the territorial disintegration of their far-flung state. Putin's Kremlin has founded its legitimacy on the manipulation of this fear.

It is Russians' collective experience of the 1990s that explains the attractiveness of Putinism. At the heart of this experience is the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the crisis that it caused. Putin's generation has no nostalgia for communism, but it does consider the Soviet Union its fatherland. When the USSR fell apart, its collapse injected a permanent sense of fragility and insecurity into Russian society's view of the world. Insecurity goes a long way toward explaining not only the greed and lust for power that one sees under Putin, but also his regime's curiously ambiguous relationship to authoritarianism as well as democracy. Russia has seen the weaknesses of both authoritarianism and democracy play out up close, and in a highly compressed period of time. Thus it is no surprise that while Putin's Kremlin does not shy away from authoritarian practices, it does not place its full trust in them either. The prime minister and his men know that, at the end of the day, even the secret police cannot save them. They *were* the secret police, after all, and they could not preserve the Soviet system or keep the USSR from coming apart. The experience of Putin's generation with ideology is also instructive. It is a cynical and nonideological generation, but also a generation that appreciates the role of ideology as an element of power politics.

The concept of "sovereign democracy" that the Kremlin cooked up is a typical "nonideological ideology." It lacks charismatic appeal. It summons people to no inspiring project. It does not travel well abroad. But it is not just a public-relations exercise. As Pierre Hassner has insightfully observed in the pages of this journal, "One of the most shocking features of Putin's policies is his attempt to claim continuity with both the Czarist and the Soviet pasts."[3]

In its everyday conduct, Putin's Kremlin is ready to improvise. But it is not as pragmatic as some of its advocates like to claim. Its thinking is profoundly shaped by its paranoid interpretation of the 1990s and its determination never again to see Russia "driven to its knees." The many analysts who think that the Putin regime's authoritarianism causes its aggressive foreign-policy behavior fail to grasp that public support for Putin's assertive foreign policy is in fact crucial to his legitimacy. Russian society at the moment does not think in terms of democracy versus authoritarianism, but rather in terms of sovereignty versus dependence. Putin's problem with democracy is that it did not contribute to Russia's greatness.

Putin's Russia is a reminder that democracy-building cannot take the place of state-building, and that a self-defined political community is not an outcome but rather a precondition of successful democratization.

The lesson that Putin's elite has drawn from the failure both of democracy and of authoritarianism in Russia over the last two decades is the absolute primacy of sovereignty in foreign policy. In the Kremlin's view, sovereignty is not a right; its meaning is not a seat in the United Nations. For the Kremlin, sovereignty means capacity. It implies economic independence, military strength, and cohesive cultural identity. In Putin's interpretation, the Russian state can survive only by being one of the world's great powers. Economic prosperity is not a goal to be pursued for its own sake, but rather is just one more requirement for the survival of the Russian state. The centrality of the sovereign state is the binding bond in the political imagination of both the Kremlin and Russian society at large.

In this sense, Putin's regime represents not interests or values but most Russians' basic fears. It is legitimate and is likely to survive the current economic crisis because it has succeeded in articulating Russian society's identity-building experience. Demographic catastrophe, economic uncertainty, fear of Russia's territorial disintegration—all these fears make Putin acceptable to Russians. It is the vision of Russia's role in the world as a great and respected power—a vision that Putin shares with a majority of his compatriots—which largely explains how his corrupt and inefficient KGB regime has managed to maintain public support over the last decade.

For liberal democrats, the upshot of this analysis is glum: Liberals are not well positioned to gain from the current crisis, for although the crisis may be destabilizing economically, it will also strengthen the very fears on which Putin's regime is based. Asking whether the current economic crisis will temper Russia's geopolitical posture also leads to a pessimistic answer. Russia can become slightly more cooperative or slightly more confrontational in its relations with the West, but its foreign policy will continue to resemble "an angry man on crutches." Moscow will not lose its taste for "small victorious wars" like the one in Georgia, nor will it tame its instinct to use oil and gas as tools of political pressure. In the end, relations between Russia and the West will continue to be characterized by a convergence of lifestyles and a divergence of worldviews.

NOTES

1. Andrei Illarionov, *Eto dazhe ne katastrofa* (This isn't even a catastrophe), *www.gazeta.ru/comments/2009/01/29_x_2933104.shtml.*

2. Ken Jowitt, "Rus United," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 24 (December 2008): 480–511.

3. Pierre Hassner, "Russia's Transition to Autocracy," *Journal of Democracy* 19 (April 2008): 6.