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Why Putin's regime is far from over

Many in the West believe that the fall of the Putin system is imminent. But Russian experts are less optimistic

Russia's transition to a more democratic state – one that is once again perceived as a partner and not as a threat to Europe – is hardly conceivable without dismantling Putin's authoritarian system. At the top, he himself, makes changes, if any at all, only in an ultra-conservative, even regressive direction. Should he remain in power until the end of his life, we can hardly expect any significant change in policy. Despite the war in Ukraine, with its many deaths and extensive destruction, Putin is convinced that he has done everything right and has no regrets, as the pro-government *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* puts it. Within the system, he is never criticised, the newspaper writes. The bureaucratic environment around him is completely conform to his own ideas.

Because of this complete loss of flexibility of the Putin system, some experts in the West and many Russian opposition figures are hoping for an upheaval that will flush the current Russian political establishment out of office. A scenario also frequently mentioned by experts is that a part of the elite, which suffers great disadvantages under the current situation, would ally itself with a dissatisfied populace for this purpose. In fact, among the Russian elite there are those who are incurring severe personal losses because of the sanctions or the war. This holds likewise for those who in the past have advised a more moderate government course, such as economic liberals close to the government or foreign policy experts who have no sympathy for the new right-wing ideology. Those people aren't all gone now – they have just largely lost their influence. In fact, such an alliance of representatives of the system and the people is the only conceivable combination for a coup scenario, because a strong oppositional movement with an alternative leadership team does not exist. Parliaments all over the country consist only of allies of the system or its own people.

Conform inner circle and elite

If you read Western press articles, you can conclude that a fall of the system is imminent. 'Power struggles in the Kremlin' and 'Putin at the

end' are the headlines of the last few months, which thereby foresee the imminent twilight. An entire wave of such assessments swept through the press at the time of the successful Ukrainian offensive in September, while the Russian army is far from defeated in the field. There is also no doubt that Putin would have to be overthrown in Russia itself – and not by the Ukrainian army, which, after all, is not planning to advance on Moscow. With every frank pronouncement from the Russian capital, journalists sense a split in the elite, and possibly even a sharpening of the knives. The desired scenario is that in an increasingly precarious situation, moderate forces around the leadership will eventually reject any reaction that comes with bloody harshness only and move on to those who want to overthrow the ever-harsher system.

Russian experts, even those who have no sympathy for the rulers, are less optimistic in this regard. For example, political scientist Vladimir Gelman writes in an analysis that such a split in the elite would require a system in which there is collective leadership and several competing factions, such as in the late Soviet era in the Politburo. But, he says, that is not the case in Russia today. According to his observation, meetings of high-ranking government officials with Putin are currently limited to demonstrating approval for decisions made by Putin alone. Gelman sees no factions around the leadership, but rather temporary cliques in the power struggle around the central figurehead – with criticism, such as that from the war hardliners Yevgeny Prigozhin and Ramzan Kadyrov at their own Ministry of Defence, being episodes in the battle over distribution of power.

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It is precisely such critical public remarks that the West likes to perceive as a symptom of a shattered power elite or even dissatisfaction with Putin himself in the entourage surrounding him. However, people like Kadyrov or Prigozhin are not actors in an independent faction who would be able to chip away at the authority of Putin. Long-time Russia journalist Maxim Kireev aptly describes their situation when he notes that neither possesses any independent source of income and would rather lock Putin up in the Kremlin than overthrow him. They fulfil a specific function in favour of the system: as figures of identification for radical supporters of the system, for whom even Russia's brutal warfare in Ukraine appears to be 'too lax'.

Gelman believes that, indeed, many members of Russia's power elite are dissatisfied with the course of the Ukraine invasion. But they are not inclined to oppose Putin himself and thus jeopardise their own position in the system. The penalties for disloyalty in Russia are harsh – even as a minister you can land straightaway in a Siberian prison – and outweigh the personal disadvantages of the war getting out of control. In addition, the Moscow elite is shaped by the historical experience that the future prospects of members of a former Russian upper class after a successful coup are not rosy – if in fact they exist at all.

True to one's ideals – but in Siberia

A successful coup scenario also requires a second component that is similarly uncertain in the current situation – namely, the people. In the face of the atrocities of war and growing totalitarianism, opposition-minded Russians are in a mood that ranges from mostly depressive to catastrophic. Such increasing totalitarianism does not need to be a symptom of a crumbling power. Even an increasingly tough dictatorship can exist for many years, as Russian history shows in the case of Stalin, for whom the excesses of the 1930s did little harm. There are many dissatisfied people in Russia, but they are finding it increasingly difficult to vent their displeasure.

Every street protest, indeed every wrong word online or in private, can now result in long-term detention. Media in which someone can make a dissenting opinion no longer exists within Russia. Journalists or experts who don't want to adapt completely to a backward system will take the only right decision and leave the country – henceforth having even less of an impact on those left behind. As a result, the Russian people are deprived of those who could lead the dissatisfied in the front row and verbalise criticism. Hardly anyone wants to end up true to their ideals but in Siberia.

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The war in neighbouring Ukraine is also a growing concern for many apolitical Russians, especially since mobilisation has brought the sons of almost every small town to the front, often against their will. But even with this unpopular measure, real mass protests were limited to only a few Russian regions such as Dagestan or Yakutia. The vast majority of the Russian population swallowed the mobilisation with just some grumbling. It is crucial to note, however, that even this measure hardly harmed

the actual initiator of this unfortunate campaign, Putin himself. Although his rating fell by five to six per cent in all national surveys, the vast majority of the population, especially the elderly, still support him.

The chaotic 1990s in Russia, the last era without Putin at the helm, are still having an impact here. Back then, people were free to express what they thought about the government, but because of the permanent economic crisis, they were more concerned with securing food. Despite economic difficulties in Russia in the current time of war, the economic sanctions have decidedly not been able to bring the Russian standard of living down to the aforementioned regions. Even the sanctions are not bringing about a change in mood. In an interview, the well-known Belarus expert Artjom Shraibman said something about the Western sanctions against his country that also applies to Russia: 'those who were critical of the West before the war are now also blaming the West, and not their own government, for the economic problems that have arisen.'

Those Westerners who turn up their noses at fatalism, even among critically minded Russian citizens, should be careful. Even the Nazi dictatorship in Germany continued to be supported until the last minute, even if many did so only passively. Nevertheless, the cruelty of the regime never let up, right up to the end.

In this debate, also read the article by Ruslan Suleymanov.



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