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Domestic Challenges Spur Russian Pragmatism toward the West

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The wave of protests in Moscow in recent months reflects heightened domestic challenges to Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime. It seems that deflections of Russian public opinion toward "the external enemy" have exhausted their effectiveness, and that the Kremlin will exploit the coming year (until the presidential election in the United States) in the hope of achieving accommodations with the United States and the European Union. This might help to reduce external pressures as period of domestic upheaval looms (Putin's "Operation Successor" in 2024, if not before; or economic dangers such as a global downturn or plunge in oil prices). The accommodation efforts will focus on the crisis in Ukraine, but the Middle East will also assume importance, specifically in the contexts of Syria and Iran-Gulf tensions. In this framework, Russia will aim to temper the competitive dynamic with the West and present more pragmatic positions. In the Kremlin's view, Israel wields much influence in regional affairs due both to its military activity and its influence on President Trump, particularly given its ties to the security-diplomatic echelon in Washington. President Putin can thus be expected to try to engage any future Israeli Prime Minister to help advance Moscow's interests.

Challenges to Internal Stability in Russia

Recent months have seen greater unrest in the Russian domestic theater, particularly regarding the local elections, including for the Moscow city council (September 8, 2019). The authorities prevented the registration of opposition candidates, limited freedom to demonstrate in the capital, and used excessive violence and legal harassment against protestors and senior opposition figures, including after the elections.

The Kremlin sighed with relief at the election results, as the main loci of power remained under regime control: its gubernatorial candidates won in all 16 regions in the first round. However, the opposition was also pleased with its success in leveraging nationally unimportant elections and rousing the public from its apathy. It also claimed success in that the legitimacy of the ballots was challenged by the low voter turnout in Moscow (22 percent) and that 20 of the 45 seats in the city council were won by moderate opposition figures rather than regime candidates.

The outcome of the elections is yet another symptom in a series of developments that point to cracks in the governance edifice that President Putin has built up over the last 20 years:

- a. Public trust in Putin has plummeted, beginning with the government's announcement that the retirement age would be raised. Unveiling this unpopular move in parallel to Russia's hosting of the World Cup (June 2018) was considered deceit, especially among the older population, which was formerly seen as his unshakable base of support. The decline in trust, reflected in opinion polls conducted since the summer of 2018, points to a reduction in support for Putin (and even more vis-à-vis other institutions – the government, parliament, and ruling United Russia party). In addition, the polls indicate a rise in the number of people who prefer that Putin not continue as president after 2024; a rise in the number of those who believe the country is heading in the wrong direction; and also a modest increase in public willingness to protest, as manifested in the demonstrations ongoing in Moscow after the elections, though most of the public still recoils from clashing with the regime.
- b. There have been increased public campaigns against the harassment of opposition activists by the security services and the justice system. In some cases, the Kremlin was compelled to intervene behind the scenes to stop unjust legal proceedings, in a manner that was seen as a capitulation to public pressure.
- c. The Russian economy is faltering, with no improvements on the horizon for the coming years. The government's conservative macro-economic policy prepared Russia to buffer shocks, at the cost of low growth. Real income has been dropped consecutively for five years since 2014, with a rise in the number of people who find it hard to procure basic goods for subsistence. Putin's socio-economic plan for his final term ("National Projects"), which was meant to propel Russia forward in various realms by 2024, has not progressed since it was announced in May 2018. The Russian economic elite fears that a serious crisis could be unleashed in the coming years by a drop in oil prices, harsher American sanctions, or a slowdown in the global economy.
- d. A multi-faceted deterioration in governance:
 - i. Political weakness of institutions on the federal and local levels; a blurring of the areas of responsibility of government agencies; excessive political influence of informal actors; and placation of the Kremlin by fulfilling its measurable goals of political importance, at the expense of solutions for fundamental problems – all neutralize the ability to advance policy and deepen rifts between government and society.
 - ii. Struggles among the power clans around the Kremlin have grown and become conspicuous. Putin, whose fatigue is evident in recent

years, has avoided getting involved. Social media are full of "kompromat" ("compromising material") leaks: reports of corruption among senior regime figures and the businesspeople close to them. There is a growing profusion of cases of senior government and security services officials being dismissed, or of salient businesspeople being arrested and stripped of their assets or fleeing the country.

- iii. Many administrative lapses have gnawed at the government's image of might and progress. For example, the Russian Defense Ministry was cast in negative light following efforts to conceal details of recent serious accidents: a submarine explosion (July, 14 killed) and the dispersal of radioactive materials in the vicinity of a missile test site (August, 7 killed). Public censure forced the Kremlin to intervene, belatedly, regarding giant wildfires in the Siberian forests (which before the public outcry the authorities had not planned to put out) and the ineffectual relief for the victims of flooding near Irkutsk.

Thus the challenges of domestic stability demand increased attention from the Kremlin top brass. This internal focus will continue to intensify as Russia approaches what is dubbed "Operation Successor" – the handover of the presidency by Putin (who is constitutionally barred from election after 2024) and attempts to keep actual power in his hands. Such a move might necessitate constitutional changes and escalate power struggles between the regime and the opposition, and among the power clans within the regime.

The Kremlin, for its part, prefers to defer "Operation Successor" so as to prevent shocks and lend legitimacy to the proceedings (decision making by elected institutions, even if the process itself is in doubt). At the same time, opposition figures are looking for an opportunity to undermine the pseudo-democratic proceedings by making the regime demonstrate its repressive nature. The regime fear of displaying weakness (a concern ascribed especially to National Security Council Secretary Patrushev, among the closest of Putin's confidants) – foments violence and suppression of the opposition, which in turn erodes the very legitimacy that Putin tries to portray.

As a result, there is special significance to the 2021 elections to the lower house of the Federal Assembly (Duma), which will decide the regime's capacity to implement constitutional amendments. The local elections of 2020 can be seen as a dress rehearsal for the event.

Domestic Challenges and Russian Foreign Policy

Putin's "social contract" with the Russian public from the outset of the millennium involves the willingness on the part of society to accept fewer individual liberties in exchange for stability, prosperity, and Russia's bolstered international clout. The plunge in oil prices, annexation of the Crimean peninsula, intervention in Ukraine (2014), and ensuing Western sanctions have required that "the contract" be updated. People have been demanded to tighten their belts so as to preserve the "greatness" of Russia.

But even the updated "contract" now needs revision. The wave of patriotism propelling Putin's popularity in 2014-2018, and which brought about his reelection as president, is ebbing. The policy of deflecting public opinion from domestic problems to outside challenges is perceived as having diminishing returns. The public is more worried about being dragged into war, Ukraine has become a "frozen conflict" and open wound, and more than half the population hope the war in Syria will end quickly. There is evident fatigue in public opinion when it comes to the state media's obsession with the "external enemy," and a discernible decline in its' perceptions of threats from the United States and Ukraine.

During the years of Putin rule, Kremlinologists described a struggle between the camp that prefers dialogue and pragmatic compromise with the West, and the camp that advocates an aggressive and confrontational track. For the most part, it was the latter that prevailed. But it is noticeable that nowadays the pragmatists are enjoying somewhat more leeway in foreign affairs, as part of the risk management policy in advance of potential shockwaves – be they social-domestic, or external-economic – in the coming years.

It is the very fact that Russia has in recent years shored up its international strategic posture and is no longer described as a "regional power" that allows it to consider possibilities for accommodation with the West. In the Kremlin's view, the current strategic context presents a unique mix of opportunities. These include:

- a. Increasing willingness among leaders of the divided European Union, which is distanced from Washington, to lower the heat with Moscow on a range of diplomatic, economic, and political matters. President Macron is investing his political capital in advancing this objective.
- b. The run-up year to a presidential election in the United States requires the Kremlin to mull agreements with the lame duck president, given the risks inherent to a change in administration. Trump has a slightly freer hand in seeking accommodation with Russia, despite the launch of impeachment proceedings against him, after the submission of the Mueller Report, the withdrawal from the INF, and the departure of those who had toed a hard line against Moscow (Mattis, Bolton, and Fiona Hill, who held the Russia file at the NSC).

- c. Intensive accommodation efforts between the superpowers in several areas of crisis and common interests:
 - i. The commitment of the new Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky, to halt fighting in his country's east, even at a cost of painful compromises, create an opening for changing the dynamic around the most acute crisis on the Russian-Western agenda. A quadripartite summit of Russia, Ukraine, France, and Germany is imminent.
 - ii. A Syria accord: US-Russian contacts have ripened to the point of agreement to convene the Syrian constitutional committee, a subject that has been under intensive negotiations since late 2015.
 - iii. If US-Iran negotiations on the nuclear file are renewed, Russia, the closest P5+1 party to Tehran, will try to play an important role in them.
 - iv. Additional possible directions for cooperation: North Korea, Afghanistan, Moldova, extension of the START treaty for limiting nuclear weaponry (which expires in 2021), and regulation of Russian gas supplies to Europe.

Ramifications

Despite the cracks, Putin's rule still appears strong: he is managing to contend with challenges in the domestic sphere, and most of the Russian public is in no rush to turn its back on him. At the same time, the forecast for internal stability requires more modesty, with a small number of pundits predicting a harsh crisis over the question of "succession" already in the coming one or two years. Localized protests in Russia will continue and are likely to spread, the more that excessive crackdowns and economic distress increase.

In the coming years, internal Russian politics can be expected to command a growing amount of Kremlin attention, in a manner that will also affect its foreign policy. If a domestic crisis evolves nonetheless, and especially if it settles the "succession" question, it is possible that there will be a reconsideration of Russian foreign policy, including in relation to the Middle East as a priority.

For the Russian leadership, the coming year will be of especial importance in assessing opportunities to reduce tension with the West. In recent years, Russia has learned that it is liable to pay a heavy price for too blunt a display of power or for overt intervention in elections beyond its borders. Assisting in Trump's reelection could still happen through legitimate accords that would cast Trump as a successful statesman, lend credence to Russia's superpower status, satisfy the Russian public's expectation for a lower risk of war, and help Putin redirect resources to the domestic arena.

On the other hand, in recent years the superpowers have not missed an opportunity to miss opportunities for accommodation. The lack of coherence by Trump and his advisors, their discord with the American (anti-Russian) establishment, Trump's and Putin's inclination for brinkmanship, the dissent in the European camp, and the tenacity of regional players – Zelensky, Bashar al-Assad, Ali Khamenei, Kim Jong-un, and others – are liable to torpedo such opportunities.

The Middle East has great importance for the future of Russian-Western relations, both as an arena with several burning crises and due to its impact on oil prices – the "elixir of life" for the Russian economy. Israel is seen in Moscow as a central player in the region that can influence accommodation processes through its military activities and its clout in Washington, regarding both the President and the defense establishment. Indeed, the Russians' main difficulty in Washington is not with those occupying the White House but with the security-diplomatic establishment and with the Congress. Israel's influence on those two latter elements, which does not depend on the identity of the Prime Minister, could have great value for the Kremlin in any scenario.

In the week before the elections in Israel, Putin praised the personal contribution of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the development of relations with Russia. But he also voiced hope that whoever was elected would "maintain what was achieved in bilateral relations and continue to advance them." For all his rapport with Netanyahu, Putin will try to build close ties with whoever heads the Israeli government, in order to avail himself of that Prime Minister in advancing Moscow's interests in the region and in Washington.