

### Strategies for Russia: Avoiding a New Cold War

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The behavior of the security services will determine the regime's trajectory in the years to come; they can side with the incumbent, stay neutral or defect. Their calculus will be informed by their assessment of the power configuration (nobody likes to side with the loser), the prospect of amnesty (no tribunals), the danger of instability spilling over to their organization (no decay of the army or police as in the late Soviet and immediate post-Soviet case), the expected impact on patronage (who will lose privileges) and the regime challengers' offers regarding incorporation. The murder of the former spy Litvinenko in London and the attempted murder of the former spy Skripal in Salisbury deter potential defectors. The regime will deter civil society from autonomous activities and use targeted violence against opposition leaders, but is likely to shy away from shooting at mass demonstrators—as did Gaddafi, Assad and Yanuko-

vych. Putin will opt for harsh riot control instead of "bloody Sundays".

With his exposure of the rottenness of Putin's kleptocracy and the sultanism of his cronies, Alexey Navalny was temporarily able to set the agenda of public communication. Like a person running amok, Navalny tried to force Putin into a decisive battle rallying the discontented around his martyrdom. Putin's spin doctors had to react, and they did by defaming, arresting and sentencing Navalny. Navalny targeted the personalist nature of Putin's regime, employing the policy style of a charismatic, populist and polarizing leader himself. Yet, any group of future challengers in Russia has to offer a programmatic alternative to Putinism, i.e., more than a mere replacement of the incumbent, and incentives to defect from the current winning coalition. Elite splits are more likely to end Putin's reign than protest.

#### *About the Author*

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## Strategies for Russia: Avoiding a New Cold War

By David Lane (Cambridge University)

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It is now over twenty years since President Putin first appeared at the apex of the Russian political elite. Since that time, relations with the West have cumulatively deteriorated. Russia's support for the secession of Crimea and the West's view of Russia's 'hybrid' warfare have led to a dominant political discourse of a new 'cold war'. Donald Trump's initial attempts to improve relations with President Putin were sabotaged. Current relations between Russia and NATO, the United States, the United Kingdom and the European Union are increasingly hostile and include sanctions which have hurt not only Russian companies but also its citizens. The UK's current foreign policy review (March 2021), for example, will raise the cap on the number of British nuclear weapons and will extend their use to retaliation against cyber-attack. Even against the background of the enormous domestic costs of the 2008 world financial crisis and the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, it is planned to increase the UK's military budget. The UK is manifestly responding to former President Trump's exhortations for the Europeans to pull their weight in NATO to sustain their own defence. Russia and China are clearly in the sights as actual or potential aggressor powers. One

major future task for President Putin will be to try to improve relations; if he is unsuccessful, he will have to find means to strengthen Russia's defences.

President Gorbachev faced similar problems and adopted a reform position which ended the Cold War. This is unlikely to be necessary or repeated by President Putin. Gorbachev came to power on a reform platform resting on a weak economic and strategic base. Putin has consolidated power. His attempts to join the hegemonic powers have failed: Putin was ignominiously excluded from the G8 group of countries. Domestically, Putin is unchallenged ideologically and has no effective political opposition: there is no 'reform movement', no likely 'coloured revolution'. The West is divided. The European Union has lost its image of freedom and prosperity, and Germany needs Russia's energy supply. The defection of the UK from the European Union will weaken the influence of the Atlantic alliance in Europe and strengthen European moves to normalise relations with Russia.

Perhaps of greater importance is the fact that Russia under Putin does not pose an ideological or strategic threat in the same way as the USSR once did. The alleged

poisoning of double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, in 2018 appears to be the main charge of the British government against the current Russian regime. But with the loss of the EU market, Britain also needs new trading partners. In the current international context, there seems to be no political or economic basis for a new cold war. Russia is most likely to continue with its policy of competitive interdependence with the West.

Of greater concern is the West's relationship with China, which is now the West's 'significant other'. The current British defence, security and foreign policy review considers China's power 'to be the most significant geopolitical factor of the 2020s'. While 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' in its current form is hardly an ideological 'challenge' to global neo-liberalism, China's economic and technological advance certainly does put in in competition with many Western companies. China presents an economic challenge to the hegemony of the USA which underlies the worsening relations between the two countries under Donald Trump and Joe Biden. The cloak of support for competitive electoral democracy, human rights, and the sanctity of interna-

tional law hides the USA's awareness of the Thucydides' trap: China is the ascendant challenger. President Xi Jinping is aware of this and has warned against any adversary taking precipitous military action. China, however, is not yet strong enough unilaterally to defeat military action by the USA. The formation of the One Belt One Road Initiative and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as well as treaties with other states are an indication that China needs, and seeks, allies. Clearly, a pact with Russia would create a strategic and military bloc which would severely weaken the USA's military hegemony and form a military balance of power. A West European strategy, led by Germany, to avert a strengthening of political and military linkages between Russia and China might well move to a European understanding with Russia. The current policy of demonising President Putin is counterproductive: it diminishes Russia as a sovereign state, denies it a status as a world power and concurrently creates the preconditions for a Sino-Russian pact. President Putin is faced with the dilemma of how strongly Russia should be coupled with an Eastern alliance led by China.

#### *About the Author*

David Lane is an Emeritus Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge University and a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences (UK). Recent publications include: *Changing Regional Alliances for China and the West* (With G. Zhu) (2018); *The Eurasian Project in Global Perspective* (2016); (With V. Samokhvalov) *The Eurasian Project and Europe* (2015); *Elites and Identity in the Transformation of State Socialism* (2014). He has recently had articles published in *Critical Sociology*, *Mir Rossii*, *The Third World Quarterly*, *Alternativy* (Moscow) and *International Critical Thought*.

## **Citizen versus Strongman: Revival, Social Class, and Social Decay in Russia's Autocracy**

By Tomila Lankina (London School of Economics and Political Science)

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As Russia approaches parliamentary elections in September 2021, analysts confront a polar set of factors and dynamics that give significant fuel to both the "glass half full" and "glass half empty" sets of sentiments. Let us start with factors related to the global context. Across the world—whether in Myanmar, Belarus, Russia, or Hong Kong—citizens have been taking to the streets in peaceful pro-democracy protests. Simultaneously, we are seeing the rise and emboldening of the autocratic strongman. Unencumbered by considerations of the sanctity of human life, rights, or dignity, dictatorships and mild autocracies masking as democracies have signalled that repression is effective as rulers increasingly break the contract with their people and engage in pop-

ular repression. While citizens across the post-communist region and protesters globally have been learning from each other, so too have dictators. Morally, citizens eschewing violence and embracing the poignant symbolism of flowers, songs, or Valentine's Day heart shaped lights of course have the upper hand. However, practically speaking, they are powerless and outgunned, if not in some cases outnumbered if one looks at the vast armies of police "special forces" or actual army divisions deployed to suppress dissent.

It is with these considerations in mind that we ought to approach the potential of Russia's forthcoming elections—and the inevitable manipulations, electoral protests, and suppression that go with them—to