

Putinism: A Praetorian System?



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Abstract

This article aims to gain an understanding of the dynamics of Putinism and how it has evolved since 2000. Since the beginning of the 2000s, the man in the Kremlin has had one goal: to restore Russia to the heart of global geopolitics by rebuilding a prosperous, powerful state that is capable of being a major player on the world stage. The centralization of power around Vladimir Putin is just one aspect of a form of exercising power that can be described as “praetorian”. The concept of “praetorianism” is the common thread that enables us to understand the political actions carried out at the highest level of the Russian state, in terms of both domestic and foreign policy, and to look ahead, on the eve of the 2018 presidential election, to the possible future developments of the exercising of power in Russia.

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Introduction

Almost 20 years after Vladimir Putin's accession to the presidency in 2000, how should the Russian political system be defined? Authoritarian modernization initiative, guided or non-competitive democracy, neo-Soviet regime, new *nomenklatura*, militocracy, “government in uniform”—there is no shortage of descriptions. This study proposes a framework for analyzing the evolution of the Russian political system under Putin's leadership which is not restricted to a comparison between the Russian political system and the western model of liberal democracy.

Putinism can be defined in two ways: on the one hand, as a certain configuration of the ruling elite centered around a hard core in control of decision-making, and on the other, as a constant stream of stories,¹ told primarily by Putin himself, providing an ongoing interpretative commentary of Russia's political history *as it unfolds*. The Putinian narrative is a metadiscourse whose emphasis on populism and patriotism has thus far served, with undeniable success, to regularly renew the political legitimacy of Russia's ruling elite. It is centered around the deep-rooted motivations that unify the country's ruling elite (beyond corporatist solidarity and financial interests, which will be dealt with here only in passing), i.e. the psychological and referential universe of those in power. What is the logic behind Putinian sovereignty? How does it justify centralizing authority and promoting an ideology based on the restoration of the country's lost power (*derzhavnost'*)? Who rules the country? What is the hard core of the powerful elite in Russia today? What is the political discourse that structures rulers' legitimacy? How does this discourse of power manage to remain in step with the population and to neutralize discontent and opposition?

In response to these questions, this publication proposes the following theory: in the early 2000s, we witnessed the crystallization of a form of *Russian praetorianism*, a product of the rejection by part of the country's ruling elite of the economic reforms implemented during the 1990s, which were believed to have resulted in an unprecedented weakening of Russia, both domestically and on the international stage. Originally, this

Translated from French by Frances Thomas.

1. C. Salmon, *Storytelling, la machine à fabriquer des histoires et à formater les esprits* [Storytelling, a tool for creating histories and shaping minds], Paris, La Découverte, 2007.

praetorianism took the form of an instinctive gathering of part of the country's political elite around its new political leader, Vladimir Putin. Upon becoming president, Putin immediately made it clear that, unlike Boris Yeltsin, he supported the revanchist cause of the defenders of the state (*gossudarstvenniki*) against the oligarchs' control of power and of strategic sectors of the Russian economy. This state of mind was widespread among the country's civil servants, as well as vast swathes of the Russian population, who felt their social and economic status had been downgraded.

A “praetorian guard” first formed around the Kremlin in 2001 and has continued to leave its mark on the structure of the ruling elite ever since. This “praetorian reaction” among the elite enjoyed popular support. At the end of the 1990s, many members of Russia's ruling elite were fully aware that they were inspiring the people of Russia to reject the politics and partisanship that they felt did not represent them. The situation was explosive, as the political system's lack of real legitimacy gave rise to the specter of revolts, or even revolutions, against the country's rulers. The fear of chaos and disorder, which became a recurring theme of official discourse during the 1990s, was the driving force behind the new, praetorian, element of political discourse spearheaded by Vladimir Putin. The current conservative patriotism that forms the basis of political consensus in Russia is the result of this.

The Kremlin's Praetorian Guard

Praetorianism as a Political Phenomenon

“Kremlinocentrism”,² the regime's focus on centralization, is a key component of the political evolution that has taken place in Russia since 2000. It is characterized by a concentration of power and resources (administrative, financial and media) around the institution of the head of state, who is also the real executive head of the country.³ It does not refer simply to the *position* of the Russian president at the top of the pyramid of institutions, but also to a centripetal *dynamic* that always leads back to the Kremlin, the geographic and symbolic home of Russian state power, in control of the key levers of power and influence. This trend has been observed throughout the almost two decades of Putinism.

The concept of praetorianism first re-emerged in political sociology at the beginning of the 1960s, in the writings of Maurice Duverger on France in the early stages of the Fifth Republic. Used by Samuel Huntington in a work published in 1968, praetorianism, or, more precisely, the concept of a praetorian state, became widespread in the study of political systems that combined formal elements of liberal democracy with authoritarian practices, or to describe—to quote the words used by Ahmet Insel with reference to Turkey—“the process through which the army, with the support of the senior civilian bureaucracy, positions itself as an independent political power, either by actually using force or by threatening to use it”. The praetorian regime could be considered a form of democratic authoritarianism or authoritarian democracy.⁴ Ahmet Insel continues:

2. J.-R. Raviot, *Démocratie à la russe : pouvoir et contre-pouvoirs en Russie* [Democracy, Russian-style: power and counterpowers in Russia], Paris, Ellipses, 2008).

3. J.-R. Raviot, *Qui dirige la Russie ?* [Who rules Russia?] Paris, Lignes de Repères, 2007.

4. A. Insel, “Cet État n’est pas sans propriétaires ! Forces prétorienne et autoritarisme en Turquie” [This state is not without owners! Praetorian forces and authoritarianism in Turkey] in O. Dabène, V. Geisser and G. Massardier (eds.), *Autoritarismes démocratiques et démocraties autoritaires au XXI^e siècle* [Democratic authoritarianism and authoritarian democracies in the 21st century], Paris, La Découverte, 2008, p. 133-153.

“Praetorianism began in republican Turkey as an ideology that prioritizes the urgent need to protect the state from both external dangers and, in particular, the threats represented by various ‘internal enemies’”.

For praetorianism to crystallize as an ideology, therefore, there must initially be a group of praetorians (a praetorian guard) that forms within the ruling elite and becomes the pivotal hub of what sociologist Charles Wright Mills calls the *triangle of power*⁵—the political and administrative elite, the economic and financial elite, and the military-strategic elite (and the military-industrial complex). According to Mills, the triangle of power consists of an informal group, which is strongly bound together by its social origins and worldview, which rules from the heart of the political system, obliterating the principles of constitutional government and democracy.

Sixty years later, Mike Lofgren, an experienced member of several American institutions, took up the theme of the triangle of power in the United States. He highlighted its transformation, since the end of the Cold War, into a veritable deep state.⁶ According to Lofgren, *Beltwayland* (the vast geographical region encompassing Washington, D.C. and the surrounding area) has become militarized, in the sense that several hundred thousand people are now employed in sectors directly linked to national security.⁷ The American deep state forms a “*hybrid association of key elements of government and parts of top-level finance and industry that is effectively able to govern the United States with only limited reference to the consent of the governed as normally expressed through elections*”. Rather than a lobby, it is a complex and interconnected network of networks “*of financial, political and personal interests that transcend institutions and the major corporations of Wall Street and Silicon Valley*”. While it is impossible to speak of a comparable deep state in Russia due to insufficient access to local sources, there is no doubt that a praetorian hard core exists. This praetorian guard is not institutionalized, but it guides the state's key strategic decisions and arbitrates between the various influences at play and the most significant conflicts within the Russian ruling class.

5. C. W. Mills, *The Power Elite*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1956.

6. M. Lofgren, *The Deep State: The Fall of the Constitution and the Rise of a Shadow Government*, New York, Viking, 2016.

7. In a 2010 survey, journalists at the Washington Post found that 854,000 employees in the private sector (in addition to civil servants) had top-secret authorization to access classified data. D. Priest and W. Arkin, “Top Secret America: a *Washington Post* Investigation”, *Washington Post*, <http://projects.washingtonpost.com>.

The Yukos affair: the event that gave birth to the praetorian guard

A praetorian guard first crystallized around the Kremlin in the early years of the Putin presidency. Its composition has shown remarkable continuity, barely altering since then. It was as a result of the Khodorkovsky affair (named after Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who bought the Yukos oil group as part of a controversial privatization scheme in 1995)⁸ that this praetorian guard was formed. In October 2003, the arrest, investigation and dramatic trial for fraud and tax evasion of Russia's wealthiest man (according to *Forbes'* 2002 list) had a strong symbolic meaning.⁹ One interpretation of these events dominated western commentary: that the affair proved the Kremlin's willingness to silence a liberal oligarch with multiple political, civic and humanitarian interests. Khodorkovsky had been involved in public debate and could eventually have become an opponent, or even rival, of Putin in terms of Russian domestic policy.

Other observers drew attention to Khodorkovsky's tactical and strategic maneuvers within the small circle of heads of oil majors. According to the American Sovietologist Marshall Goldman, it was the repeated press leaks about construction projects for new oil pipelines running towards China, as well as the rumors of talks on alliances with other global oil giants—not to mention the huge media coverage of the ties forged by the head of Yukos with certain leading figures within the ruling elite of the US, who had become board members of his Open Russia foundation—that ended up having a political impact. In 2003, Putin suspected the oligarch of wanting to develop a parallel foreign policy. At the time when Russia (alongside France and Germany) was expressing its fierce opposition to the US-UK military intervention in Iraq, liberal and pro-western voices—including that of Khodorkovsky—appeared in the Russian press in order to criticize the Kremlin's position, appealing to the government not to hinder “Operation Iraqi Freedom”. Nevertheless, it appears to have been the maneuvers undertaken by Khodorkovsky in order to sell his shares in Yukos to ExxonMobil and BP that led President Putin to support the legal proceedings against him. Having been made aware of these negotiations by the executive director of ExxonMobil (whose chairman and chief executive officer at the time was Rex Tillerson, now US Secretary of State) during a meeting in New York on the sidelines of an economic summit, in early October 2003, Putin is believed to have become

8. R. Sakwa, *Putin and the Oligarch. The Khodorkovsky-Yukos Affair*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2014.
9. On 20 December 2013, Mikhail Khodorkovsky was pardoned by presidential decree after 10 years in prison. Since then he has lived in Switzerland, from where he heads the Open Russia foundation.

convinced that Khodorkovsky, by bringing in US oil majors as shareholders of Yukos, was seeking not just to recapitalize his group, but to merge it with an American giant. By taking the initiative to carry out such a reshaping of the global energy landscape—and in a sector of strategic importance for Russia—the magnate, in Putin's mind, was becoming a threat to Russia's national interest.¹⁰ The Khodorkovsky affair therefore marked a decisive turning point in allowing the creation and structuring of Putinism around a praetorian guard consisting of key figures within the state's sovereign sectors, all of whom were close to the president, which would collectively take control of the strategic sectors of the Russian economy.

10. M. Goldman, "Putin and the Oligarchs. The Khodorkovsky Affair", *Foreign Affairs*, November-December 2004, www.foreignaffairs.com.

The Advent of *korpokratura*

The combination of political and economic functions

In order to block a potential “takeover bid” for Russia's strategic resources and capacities—primarily in the field of energy—the Kremlin created a duplicate: a fairly informal capitalist and financial structure based on group solidarity and on strong generational, geographical (Saint Petersburg) and/or professional ties (KGB, other defense or security sectors). At the head of “the firm”¹¹ or “Politburo 2.0”¹², behind the figurehead of Vladimir Putin, are several ministers and senior individuals within the government and the Presidential Administration. A distinguishing characteristic of the members of this group is their combination of all senior functions within the state with the running of the board of directors or executive committee of a large group (private, public or mixed). This system of control by the country's supreme political and administrative elite of the most strategic sectors of the economy can be classed as *korpokratura*.¹³ The movement to remove senior civil servants from company boards, initiated under Dmitry Medvedev, did not succeed.¹⁴ It was not until 2012 that this accumulation of powers, which was strongly denounced during the wave of political protests in winter 2011-12 against the “party of crooks and thieves” (in the words of Alexei Navalny, the chief opponent of the regime), was officially forbidden. However, the prohibition did nothing to call the “corporate” nature of the state into doubt.

11. Y. Felshtinsky, V. Pribylovsky, *The Corporation: Russia and the KGB in the Age of President Putin*, New York, Encounter Books, 2009.

12. “Politburo 2.0 i postkrymskaia Rossiia” [Politburo 2.0 and post-Crimean Russia], Minchenko Consulting, 23 October 2015, <http://minchenko.ru>.

13. *Korpokratura* is a neologism formed from the Russian words *korporatsia* (corporation) and *nomenklatura* (a widespread system used by the party in the Soviet era to control positions of power). It is a new form of *nomenklatura*, but a very informal one, which places the most senior political and economic positions in the hands of a small elite. See J.-R. Raviot, *Qui dirige la Russie ?*, *op. cit.* [3].

14. See M. Korostikov, “Leaving to Come Back: Russian Senior Officials and the State-Owned Companies”, *Russie.Nei.Visions* No. 87, Ifri, August 2015, www.ifri.org.

The figureheads

The former president Dmitri Medvedev (2008-2012), Prime Minister since 2012, spent the entire 2000s as deputy chief of staff of the presidential administration *and* chairman of Gazprom, and is the most emblematic figure of *korpokratura*. The profile of Igor Sechin, currently chief executive officer of Rosneft, Russia's leading oil company, is typical of *korpokratura* figures. A native of Saint Petersburg with a degree in Portuguese, Sechin made a career in the intelligence services of the Soviet armed forces (the GRU)—holding several undercover positions in Portuguese-speaking countries—before following Vladimir Putin as deputy chief of staff of the presidential administration (throughout Putin's first two terms in the Kremlin, between 2000 and 2008), then as deputy Prime Minister (when Putin was head of government between 2008 and 2012), combining his senior political functions with the chairmanship of Rosneft from 2004 to 2011. Sechin is the archetypal praetorian “corpocrat” of the first generation, a sort of prototype for Putin's praetorian guard. Sergey Chemezov is another key player in Russia's corpocratic praetorianism. He is even closer than Sechin to Vladimir Putin, with whom he is believed to have worked in the KGB's units in the German Democratic Republic during the 1980s. Appointed in 2007 as head of the state corporation (*goskorporatsiia*) Rostekh (civilian and military high technology) after serving as director general of Rosoboronexport (the state monopoly in arms exports), Chemezov has held key functions within the United Russia party since 2012. To illustrate the reality of *korpokratura*, it should be pointed out that in January 2017, Chemezov sat on the boards of five major Russian groups (in the aviation, automobile and banking sectors) and chaired the boards of no fewer than five major Russian groups or state corporations (including Rosoboronexport).

It is worth mentioning other leading figures with a similar profile, even though they now belong to the past. These include Vladimir Yakunin, the former head of the (state) railway company, and Sergey Ivanov, a former Defense Minister, former deputy Prime Minister, and chief of staff of the presidential administration between 2011 and 2016. Like Chemezov and Sechin, these two men are *siloviki*, members of the so-called ministries of force, whose profile can be described as “militocratic”, to use the term coined by sociologist Olga

Kryshtanovskaya.¹⁵ According to Kryshtanovskaya, the militocratic identity of the members of the hard core of the Kremlin's guard, to this day, has an outsized influence on the values, ethos and ideological orientation (conservative patriotism, mistrust of the west) of the Russian ruling elite as a whole.

Militocrats and corpocrats

In the medium term, it seems likely that the trend of “corpocratization” within the Russian ruling elite could call into question the militocratic foundation of the praetorian guard: in 2007, the head of the state committee for the control of the circulation of narcotic and psychotropic substances (FSKN), Viktor Cherkesov, warned against this phenomenon in a newspaper article that cost him his job.¹⁶ At a time of generational changeover at the highest level of the state, the corpocratic nature of Russia's ruling elite enables us to understand the internal logics of such ruling figures better than a focus on the neo-Soviet identity of the hard core of the Russian ruling class. In 2017, we are no longer dealing with the “new nobility” that emerged from the ranks of the KGB or from the Soviet state's sovereign sectors, seeking to restore the old order.¹⁷ *Korpokratura* is no longer limited to those who Kryshtanovskaya in 2004 called “the children of Andropov”, the uninhibited heirs of the “chekist memory”. The Russian corpocrats of today are no longer simply the new masters of the *nomenklatura*, converted to capitalism and global finance: they form a ruling class without precedent in Russian or Soviet history. In 2017, *korpokratura* is characterized by its *mastery of the practices of global capitalism under the protection of sovereign institutions*.

Beyond the constitutionally defined prerogatives of the positions (President or Prime Minister) that he holds, Vladimir Putin embodies the supreme political authority of the country. He is the ultimate arbiter of all conflicts and the embodiment of the continuity of the Russian state. Russia's political system can unquestionably be described as an “elective monarchy”. However, behind the facade of constantly proclaimed political unity, the Russian state can be likened to Janus, the two-faced Roman god: the first of these faces is the

15. O. Kryshtanovskaia, *Anatomiia rossijskoj elity* [Anatomy of the Russian elites], Moscow, Zakharov, 2004.

16. V. Cherkesov, “Nel'zia dopustit', chtoby voiny prevratilis' v tovgovtsev” [Soldiers should not become businessmen], *Kommersant*, 9 October 2017, www.kommersant.ru.

17. A. Soldatov and I. Borogan, *The New Nobility: the Restoration of Russia's Security State and the Legacy of the KGB*, New York, Public Affairs, 2010.

“sovereign” one, comprising the sectors that can be described as sovereign in the strictest sense of the word (interior, security, defence, foreign affairs, etc.), as well as a great many state political-administrative prerogatives (domestic political matters and federalism, regional policies, etc.), while the “business” face covers a vast economic and financial complex, ranging from deputy Prime Ministers and ministers in the domains of economics, industry, energy and finance to the heads of the biggest public and private companies. This component of the state also includes certain major banks, with the country's central bank lying at the very heart of the system.

Of these two faces of the state, the sovereign face continues to have more media exposure and still represents the power of the state (*gosudarstvennost'*) as a whole, perpetuating the historical representation of Russia as a state that is constantly seeking power and strength. Under these conditions, the *siloviki* and the “Putin clones” attract the attention of the cameras, but the strategic foundation of the state has shifted towards the economic and financial domain. In other words, *the Russian state today is considerably more corporatic than militocratic*. Russian praetorianism is now anchored in a vast economic and financial complex that has become the nerve center of the ruling elite and the core of the decision-making system. This shift in the center of gravity of decision-making power began during Putin's second term as president (2004-2008), and has continued to grow ever since.

One deputy, a keen observer of political and institutional evolution in Russia, has noted this corporatization of politics and parliament, and regrets the growing power—which he depicts as a fundamental evolution and a constant of the last 20 years—of new, essentially technocratic, deputies who are “*totally depoliticized*” and much more inclined “*to respond to the demands of big companies than the expectations of a population with whom they are increasingly out of touch*”.¹⁸ A former Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration in charge of domestic policy is even more explicit about the corporatic evolution within the Russian ruling elite:

18. Interview by the author with this deputy (born in 1950), a mathematician, professor at Moscow State University, member of the communist faction of the State Duma since 1995, and first deputy chairman of the State Duma since 2011, Moscow, March 2017.

“The fight against corruption and the merry-go-round of dismissals and appointments are frequently discussed as being of a political or even ideological nature, whereas they are nothing more than masks in a war whose aim is to conquer or safeguard economic and financial interests, with, in every case, ramifications for purely private interests... The patriotic siloviki are characters who either belong to the past or are playing a role, an act for the benefit of television and western commentators”.¹⁹

19. Interviews by the author with the person in question (born in 1973), a former adviser to the head of government administration (2011-2012), former deputy chief of staff of the presidential administration in charge of domestic policy (2012-2014), former member of the civic chamber of the Russian Federation, and director of a conservative think tank, Moscow, March 2017.

The Growing Power of the Technocrats

The decline of the “historic *siloviki*” and the changeover

After Vladimir Putin returned to the Kremlin as president in 2012, the praetorian guard underwent an evolution that had first begun in 2008, marked by the withdrawal of militocratic individuals within the ruling elite. The dismissal of certain key figures enabled Putin to demonstrate that he was fighting corruption, without sparing those at the very highest levels of the ruling class. In this sense, the sacking of the Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov, in October 2012, marked a real turning point. Suspected of having ignored the arrangement of certain “corruption schemes” within the Oboronservis group, a provider of services to the Russian Armed Forces and Defense Ministry, Serdyukov was the first senior figure within the Russian executive to have been officially stripped of his duties since 2000. He was replaced by Sergey Shoygu, a man very close to Vladimir Putin, illustrating the president's willingness to carry out an in-depth overhaul of the militocracy, and even to promote a “neo-militocratic” profile within the ruling elite (see below). In 2016, the dismissal of Viktor Ivanov, long considered one of the most influential men in the president's entourage, was symbolic of the decline of the historic *siloviki* and the inexorable eradication of the praetorian guard of the 2000s. A former deputy chief of staff of the presidential administration who had emerged from the ranks of the KGB, Ivanov had held (alongside his position within the executive) several important posts at the head of large companies within the military-industrial complex, then at Aeroflot, before being appointed head of the FSKN in 2008. In May 2016, he was dismissed from all positions within the executive.

In addition to these high-profile sackings, *korpokratura* is also evolving thanks to the natural succession of the generations. The “Putin generation” (the president was born in 1952) is being erased to the benefit of new figures and, above all, the rising power of technocrats and managers. Anton Vaino (born in 1972), appointed chief of staff of the presidential administration in August 2016, embodies a new, genuinely post-Soviet, generation of technocrats, with no professional past or links

with the institutions of force that prevailed in the Soviet era. A graduate of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), one of the traditional *almae matres* of Russian diplomats and senior federal administrators, Vaino's profile is typical of the *civiliki* (civilian, as opposed to the *siloviki*, the “militocrats”), the ruling cadres of the federal administration, major industrial or financial groups and/or the legal or consultancy professions—they often move between these three areas throughout their career—who are supplanting the *siloviki* and the *syrieviki* (senior cadres of large energy and mining groups, often former *siloviki*) within the ruling elite. The growing power of the *civiliki* can be interpreted as a sociological evolution linked to the economic and social modernization of Russia as a whole. It can also be seen as the result of the political will of the Medvedev-Putin “tandem” to give cadre policy a meritocratic dimension. Making modernization the watchword of his presidency, Dimitri Medvedev in 2008 set up a cadre reserve (*rezerv kadrov*) system, with a view to putting in place a meritocratic mechanism for recruiting and managing the careers of state cadres. Since then, this system has been extended and become widespread across all federal and regional institutions, as well as in large organizations and companies. According to one very enlightening study, this promotion by those in power of the “*meritocratic imperative*” responds to a “*social demand for meritocracy*” that is the result—though it may initially seem paradoxical—of a sharp rise in social inequality in Russia. As in many countries throughout the world, capital (physical assets, but also social and symbolic capital) is increasingly concentrated in the hands of the upper-middle classes in the cities, meaning that the demand for meritocracy reinforces the tendency towards the “*technocratization of federal bureaucracy*” and “*results in the gentrification of the Russian elite as a whole*”. From now on, only children from the upper social classes, who were born and/or trained in the cities (primarily Moscow and Saint Petersburg) and have a university degree, have a chance of securing a position as a ruling cadre within the federal state (and, by extension, within any of the country's big companies).²⁰ It therefore follows that the system of *korpokratura* will lead to the creation of a Russian ruling class that is more meritocratic, but also more closed, both geographically and sociologically, and is increasingly cut off from the rest of Russian society, due not just to its standard of living, but also to its way of life and worldview.

20. V. Diatlikovich and F. Chapkovskij, “Kto est’ kto v rossijskoj elity. ‘Socialnaia set’ federal’nykh chinovnikov” [Who’s who among the Russian elites. A map of federal officials], *Russkij Reporter*, 7 September 2011, <http://rusrep.ru>.

The corpocratic web

The system of korpokratura weaves a corpocratic web, consisting of administrative, political, economic and financial networks that intersect with coalitions of interests and clientelist, nepotistic and dynastic alliances. Homeric battles are taking place out of the spotlight, pitting the different sectors of the Russian elite (*siloviki*, *syrieviki*, *civiliki*) against each other. These battles are no longer as affected—as they could be during the time of privatizations in the 1990s—by schisms between different professional cultures or profiles, and still less by ideological divergences. It is corpocratic logics that prevail. Due to the ban (since 2012) on holding executive functions both within the state and at the head of a big company, certain “great tycoons” withdrew into their corporate duties, such as Igor Sechin, mentioned above, at the head of Rosneft.

Is Russian praetorianism therefore dedicated to becoming more and more corpocratic and less and less sovereign? Such an evolution would pose a serious challenge to the existence of a praetorian guard, and even to the sustainability of praetorianism itself. In a recent summary of what he calls the “*Sechin doctrine*”, which corresponds more or less to praetorianism, the liberal political scientist Vladimir Pastukhov concludes that Putinism is on the point of becoming obsolete: “*this regime, which was created solely for the purposes of preservation and which intends to freeze Russian society for decades to come, will spark the revolution that will result in its own downfall*”.²¹ Pastukhov appears to harbor the hope that the Putin system, having been internally weakened and confronted with the rise of what he calls the “*liberal social demand*” (more meritocracy, a more effective fight against corrupt practices, more international openness) among the leading figures of the younger generation, will disintegrate. According to the author, the authoritarian regime known as Putinism is in its death throes. Russia is at the dawn of a new era of liberal reforms, led by a radical evolution of Russian society. Pastukhov believes that Putin himself has set in motion an attempt at liberalization in order to “*try to catch up with a movement that is out of his control*”. He sees the progression of the *civiliki* towards the upper echelons of power as a sign of the inevitable process of liberalization under way. In particular, he cites the recent promotion (in October 2016) of Boris Yeltsin's former Prime Minister, Sergey Kiriyenko, to the position of deputy chief of staff of the presidential administration to replace Vyacheslav Volodin, an influential senior figure within the Kremlin who became

21. V. Pastukhov, “‘Doktrina Sechina’. Vzliot i padenie gossudarstvenno-oligarkhicheskogo kapitalizma v Rossii” [The “Sechin doctrine”. The rise and fall of state and oligarchic capitalism in Russia], *Novaia Gazeta*, 22 March 2017, www.novayagazeta.ru.

chairman of the Duma following the legislative elections of September 2016. Kiriyenko, an economist by training who emerged from the liberal circles of the state bureaucracy of the 1990s, has, throughout the Putin era, held a key position at the interface of *korpokratura* and sovereign power—he was the head of state corporation Rosatom, the Russian federal agency for atomic energy, from 2005 to 2016—and, rather than a liberal kept at the margins of the ruling class, can be seen as a very loyal corpocrat, a *civilik* of the highest order who has constantly belonged, if not to the inner circle, at least to the elite group of 500 key figures of *korpokratura*.

A Revival of Praetorianism?

In rebuttal of the theory of the decline of Putinism, there are many indicators to suggest, on the contrary, that praetorianism is enjoying a revival in Russia. An initiative aimed at perpetuating Putinism is under way.

Due to the centralization of Russia's economic and financial resources, the country's economic development and, more generally, its globalization strategy depend on a reduced number of key sectors, which are closely linked to the state. Under these conditions, *korpokratura* cannot be reduced to a political-administrative scheme aimed at maintaining and reinforcing the control of state power and resources by a small section of the elite: it is the result of a strategy based on the observation that Russia is structurally dependent on several large groups and sectors (energy, commodities, arms) that must be “protected” (and controlled) by the political elites. To the extent that the legitimate use of force (use of sovereign powers: defense, police, security, etc.), in both its material and symbolic forms, remains and will remain a key resource for the exercise of power, other sovereign prerogatives, less visible to the naked eye (economic and financial regulation, control of legal and judicial expertise), will grow in importance, with the corollary that the scope of influence and action of the traditional *siloviki* (interior, defense, security, etc.) will diminish, to the benefit of those with more technical skills (network surveillance and cyber security, fiscal regulation and policy, technical, financial and environmental standards, etc.). All this means that the technocratization of the ruling elites will not relegate praetorian political resources to a level of lesser importance. On the contrary, we could witness the birth of a new praetorian technocracy, emerging from the new sectors mentioned above.

Eventually, this evolution will have profound repercussions on the structure of Russia's ruling elite. Tribal wars over the monopoly of these new administrative resources will no doubt be decisive. It is unreasonable to bet on a natural westernization of the Russian elite, prompted by a drastic change in its mores and worldview. No conclusion can be drawn with regard to the evolution of the political system in the medium term before we can observe how the first generation of the *korpokratura* will

distribute its social, economic, political and symbolic capital. This process of asset distribution is only just beginning. Will the highest level of the *korpokratura* forge collective strategies, or will every-man-for-himself individualism prevail? Will a form of class solidarity among the rich and powerful emerge (in the context of a greater concentration of wealth and power than can be seen in the countries of the European Union)? Or will this group break up, passing on to its heirs only its wealth, which to a large extent will have been transferred abroad, and not the political power that it holds—which is scarcely considered a resource by the members of a new generation that feels less connected to Russia than its ancestors (due to foreign study and residence)?

In a comparative study of “strong states” (the authoritarian regimes of Russia, Turkey, Pakistan and China), the political scientist Andrei Tsygankov concludes that two strategies are likely to allow this type of political system to perpetuate itself: top-down control of the composition of the hard core of the ruling elite, and the constant reformulation of mobilizing objectives for the various factions that make up this group, as well as for broad sections of civil society.²² In order to perpetuate the praetorian guard formed in the early 2000s, Vladimir Putin must ensure that it is renewed, whilst also retaining control of the state bureaucracy and of the coalitions that form within the ruling group of the *korpokratura*, with the principal challenge being to keep himself at the center of the web, which requires tight control over information networks and an ability to oversee the process of generational changeover.

Aware of the changes discussed above, which are weakening the praetorian guard, Putin has undertaken to promote, since the turning point of the Ukrainian crisis and the annexation of Crimea, the emergence of a “neo-militocracy”. This involves perpetuating the praetorian hard core of the ruling elite by anchoring it to a reinforced but renewed *silovik* profile. The creation of the National Guard (*Rosgvardiia*) in 2016, which arose from the detachment of the militarized forces of the interior ministry (MVD), has often been discussed from the perspective of an “authoritarian tightening of the regime”.²³ Its running was entrusted to a man from the inner circle, a native of Saint Petersburg from the same generation as Vladimir Putin—Viktor Zolotov, the former head of the president's security service (2000-2013) and deputy Interior Minister. This initiative demonstrates the president's desire to strengthen his praetorian guard. The

22. A. Tsygankov, “Sil’noe gosudarstvo: teoriia i praktika v 21 veke” [The strong state: theory and practice in the 21st century], *Valdai Papers* No. 15, Valdai Club, May 2015, <http://ru.valdaiclub.com>.

23. V. Pastukhov, *op. cit.* [21].

creation of the *Rosgvardiia*, which is directly linked to the president, can be seen as a *de facto* extension of the scope of the Kremlin's powers in terms of security. The head of state now controls, via his power to appoint the head of the National Guard, a significant number of armed forces and special detachments, which had previously been attached to the MVD or to other ministries of force. Symbolically, this gesture can be interpreted as a willingness to go back to the “source” of Putinism.

The president has given other signals that the prestige of the *siloviki* within the ruling elite is growing once again. The appointment in 2012 of Sergey Shoygu as Defense Minister was evidently aimed at promoting an exceptional political figure—Minister of Civil Defense and Emergency Situations between 1994 and 2012, he has enjoyed the highest popularity rating in Russian public opinion (after Vladimir Putin) for almost 20 years—but also at boosting the profile of the militocratic component, the hard core of the praetorian guard. Shoygu apparently embodies a neo-militocratic profile that combines the ultra-traditional image of the “man in uniform” with the very contemporary (and media-friendly) one of the humanitarian. Shoygu is admired as much for his reputation as a seasoned exponent of legitimate violence as for his capacity (a rare one among senior figures in Russia) to show compassion towards “ordinary Russians”, a talent he has deployed at times of large-scale natural disasters and terrorist incidents—and in particular during the fires of summer 2010.²⁴ The renewal of praetorianism thus reinforces not only the regime, but also its legitimacy.

24. E. Bertrand, *Pouvoir, catastrophe et représentation : mise(s) en scène politique(s) des incendies de l'été 2010 en Russie occidentale* [Power, disaster and representation: the political mise en scène of the fires of summer 2010 in western Russia], doctoral thesis in political science, Paris Institute of Political Studies, 2016.

Putinian Storytelling: Sovereignty and Patriotism

In both his speeches and his numerous media appearances, Vladimir Putin weaves the thread of *his* own political story, always seeking to control the storytelling of his entry into History. Far from being mere packaging, a discourse of communication intended to present his political actions, this Putinian storytelling undoubtedly constitutes an essential component, if not the central component, of Putin's politics, to the extent that the discourse of the central figure, the kingpin of the Russian political system, represents the only *power* of which he alone controls all the levers.²⁵

Several liberal commentators have rightly pointed to the limits of the control exerted by the central power over public actions. The economist Vladislav Inozemtsev defines Putinism as a “*system of powerlessness with the appearance of power*” (*derzhavnoe bessilie*), with Russia being ruled “*by a man who talks a great deal, but is prepared to do practically nothing concrete*”.²⁶ While the imperative of a strong state constitutes the cornerstone of official rhetoric, the effectiveness of the “power vertical” on which Putin supposedly rests is frequently called into question, including by analysts (even those who are very close to the president). Valery Fadeyev, Editor in Chief of the magazine *Ekspert*, willingly stresses the weakness of the Russian state, particularly as “*the deep-rooted defiance inspired by the ruling elites, who are perceived as largely corrupt and privileged—the new boyars—renders them powerless to implement the changes that they claim to want to bring about.*” It is “*because he has become a master of the manipulation of a certain ideology*” that Putin can exert, through his words, an influence within the “*plate tectonics of Russian power [...] where horizontal movements between interest groups and lobbies are more important than vertical ones... because top-down initiatives have a very limited impact on reality*”. Fadeyev, along with a great many other observers who are just as close to the Kremlin, continually points out that Putin's discourse, a key tool in the exercise of

25. In this sense, see T. Stanovaya, “Putin's Post-Political Government”, Carnegie Moscow Center, 26 June 2017, <http://carnegie.ru>.

26. V. Inozemtsev, “Derzhavnoe bessilie: kakovy itogi 16-letnego pravleniia Vladimira Putina” [Powerful powerlessness: what are the outcomes of Putin's 16 years in power], RBK, 12 January 2016, www.rbc.ru.

power, has, after all, only a limited influence on public actions. “*Putin publicly complains that barely a quarter of his decisions are implemented*”, with the rest being either ignored or circumvented by the very people who should be putting them into practice.²⁷

Since choice of rhetoric is a decisive lever of political action, the renewal of the sources of Putinian political legitimacy—control over storytelling—constitutes an essential instrument for perpetuating the political system as a whole. Thus, the discourse of foreign policy has become one of the sources of Vladimir Putin's renewed internal legitimacy, with the rhetoric of stabilization and consolidation of the 2000s showing clear signs of having run out of steam during the protest movement of winter 2011-2012. During the last 15 years, the discourse of foreign policy has evolved in terms of both reinforcement and clarification. Prior to 2007, the Russian president had already stated his ambition to restore Russia's position on the international stage—the country's global status having completely collapsed during the 1990s. The Munich speech of February 2007 marked a turning point, when a genuine Russian sovereignty took root. This new direction was subsequently reinforced, particularly during the speech given by Putin in Sochi at a meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club in 2014.

The distinction between foreign policy and domestic policy is key. The imperative need for power, proclaimed by Vladimir Putin when he was first elected to the Kremlin, does not arise solely from a desire for *restoration*, but also from a desire for *reaction* through words—to ward off the collapse of the Russian Federation in the face of widespread threats of a new kind (Islamic terrorism; foreign political, economic or humanitarian interference; political separatism and “extremism”). In the psyche of a generation of Russian leaders, these threats are reminiscent of the context of the break-up of the USSR, which they experienced as a trauma. This reorientation of Russian foreign policy towards regaining power is based on a broad consensus of both elites and public opinion. If the Munich speech outlined what for convenience can be called Russian sovereignty, it is because the president used it to develop an alternative worldview to that of the West. He clearly stated Russia's desire to promote a form of *neo-Westphalianism* in order to break with the unipolar world that is shaped and dominated by the power of America and its allies, which he openly described as “*vassals*”, and the Euro-Atlantic area as a whole. Faced with America's pivot towards the doctrine of full-spectrum dominance in the late 1990s, Putinian foreign policy is a doctrine of balance between the great powers that can be summarized as follows: Russia must deploy all

27. Interview by the author with Valery Fadeyev, Moscow, March 2017.

components of its capacity for harm, all instruments of classic diplomacy and influence peddling at its disposal, with the aim of always bringing about the powerlessness of the American hegemon, trapped within its own superpower. The dynamic of Putinism, in terms of both diplomacy and domestic policy, is one of *pragmatic action* dominated by the (deeply conservative) logic of maintaining power and the continuity of the state. In his speech in Sochi in 2014, Putin further elaborated on this theme, whilst raising the level of his confrontation with the US, which he accused of acting “*like nouveaux riches who have just acquired a large fortune*”.²⁸

Russian patriotism represents the other essential component of a Putinian rhetoric that has praetorian undertones. Relaunched by the fervent *Krym nash* (Crimea is ours) movement, which emerged in the context of the “unification of Crimea” with the Russian Federation, patriotic rhetoric gives substance to what is known as the Putinian consensus, which is frequently measured by opinion polls that consistently give Vladimir Putin a very high trust rating. Widely taken up in the mass media, this patriotic rhetoric was conceived as a unifying element, with the aim of consolidating national unity (against both external and internal threats) by prompting the permanent mobilization of the people behind their leaders in a joint momentum and a joint fight, with the rhetoric constantly being framed within the historic continuity of the victory of 1945. The Russian patriotic rhetoric can eclipse the purely political and social issues that are the most sensitive to public opinion, such as corruption, social and regional inequality, ethnic, cultural or religious animosity, and the many consequences of neo-liberal policies that are also an essential aspect of Putinism. In this sense, Putinian storytelling is not merely a discourse intended to bring about consensus: it is no less than a formula for unanimity.

It is in this context that we should consider the success of the “Immortal Regiment” (*Bessmertnyj polk*) demonstrations. Ever since 2014, processions held on May 9 have brought millions of people onto the streets of cities in Russia and abroad. Born out of the initiative of a group of journalists in Tomsk in 2011, this demonstration aimed to make the Victory Day celebration of May 9 a more civic and less official occasion (it is traditionally marked by processions of former fighters and the big military parade in Red Square, broadcast live on television). This initiative initially aimed to “*reignite the memory of the Great Patriotic War among the younger generations*” and to “*give it new birth*” by forging a link

28. Vladimir Putin, Speech to the Valdai Discussion Club, Sochi, 24 October 2014. See “Valdajskaja rech’ Putina. Osnovnye tezisj” [Putin’s Valdai speech. Key themes], Vesti.ru, 24 October 2014, www.vesti.ru.

between individual and family history (participants are encouraged to march through the streets on May 9 carrying a placard bearing a photograph of an ancestor) and world history. The chairman of the Immortal Regiment movement, one of its main instigators, analyses the reasons for its success thus: the Immortal Regiment allows for a less restrained, less solemn expression of national pride, and in a way has “democratized” popular patriotism by inverting the perspective of Victory Day: *“the people are no longer standing by, watching the spectacle of the military parade (the victors); they are now taking control of their own memories”*. Nevertheless, he is reluctant to go along with a political interpretation according to which the demonstration is an expression of “*civic praetorianism*” and the participants are the “*defenders of the state*” and of its rulers.²⁹ In his view, the Immortal Regiment is proof of the existence of a popular patriotism that is both consensual and depoliticized. It must be noted that this mass mobilization, which coincided with the *Krym nash* movement, was a godsend for a regime whose official rhetoric rests, in the context of perpetuating post-1945 Soviet history, on the shared memory of the “great victory of 1945”. The indisputable success of these processions (which brought several million Russians and former Soviets onto the streets all over the world in 2017) appears to prove that the praetorian rhetoric of Russia's rulers is echoed by and well received among the population. Nevertheless, with the ever decreasing number of veterans and the growing distance between younger generations of Russians and the living memory of the war, the country's rulers will inevitably be forced to change the shared memories in its repertoire, an official discourse that “*can admirably evoke the past but does not speak the language of the young at all*”...³⁰

29. Interview by the author, Moscow, March 2017.

30. Interview by the author, Moscow, April 2017.

Conclusion

In rebuttal of the liberal theory of an inexorable decline of Putinism, there are several factors to suggest that it is enjoying a revival. The *Krym nash* movement showed that Russian patriotism represented a reservoir of symbolic and memory-related resources that could be used to renew and re-legitimize Putinism. As a result, the very likely fourth presidential term of Vladimir Putin (2018-2024) could be a golden age for Russian praetorianism. Far from being a brake on economic development, it can be seen as an essential driver of the economy. The centralization of Russia's economic and financial resources means that the country's economic development and the way in which it engages in globalization are dependent on a reduced number of large strategic sectors linked to the state. Thus, *korpokratura*, which is the result of an economic strategy based on the acceptance of a reality in which Russia is and will continue to be dependent on several large groups and sectors (energy, commodities, arms), can be seen as a rational and effective strategic arrangement. It therefore seems logical to wait for Vladimir Putin's likely departure from the Russian political scene in 2024 (when he will be 72) to envisage the possibility of changes to the country's political system. In the absence of a figure as charismatic and dominant as its namesake, Putinism will cease to exist. For the time being, no political opposition has managed to organize itself in such a way as to prompt a handover of power.

Nevertheless, while the decline of Putinism scarcely seems a possibility before 2024, we should at least consider its fragility. It is true that the system rests on a form of controlled, effective political communication, but the exacerbation of its praetorian dimension indicates that its dynamic is based on the persistence of a minimum threshold of tension with the western "enemy". "Resistance to the imperialism of Washington" is a recurring rhetorical theme that serves to maintain the popularity of praetorianism and, in doing so, the legitimacy of the regime and of the current president. In particular, we must not neglect two key aspects of the fragility of Putinism, which could turn out to be decisive during the post-Putin transition period that will begin in the coming years. Firstly, the levers of power are clearly eroding, as proven by the complete overhaul of elites carried out since 2016 within the government, the federal administration and the contingent of governors (the administrative heads of Russia's regions and republics). Secondly, the Putinian edifice of

democracy with no handover of power, with a dominant party and vertical management by the various administrations (presidential, regional, municipal, etc.) is weakening. The emergence of a political opposition that is capable of coming to power via the ballot box certainly seems very unlikely. Nevertheless, the Russian political system does not rest on the support of a large majority of citizens—as the results of presidential and legislative elections may suggest—but on the allegiance by default of a relative majority to the regime in power, while the absolute majority is largely depoliticized and indifferent to political issues.

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