



The Co-Construction of Putin's Power: Implications for Western Policymakers

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Introduction

Russia is an authoritarian state. Its president, Vladimir Putin, has for 20 years sat more or less unchallenged atop a system of formal institutions and informal arrangements. This system comprises an impressive repressive apparatus encompassing the ruling party; its main parliamentary competitors; and virtually every elected federal, regional, and municipal official, as well as the banks; the commanding heights of industry; television stations; and increasingly, segments of the internet. With the changes to the country's constitution, Putin is set to extend his rule as far as 2036 or beyond.

To focus on this apparatus of control alone, however, is to misunderstand how Russia actually works, and thus how the country's domestic and international politics are likely to develop. It is also to misunderstand the role that the U.S. plays in Russian politics. Social psychology and indices of public moods indicate that support for Putin's system has become normalized in Russian society, suggesting that focusing on the repressive apparatus or Putin's popularity alone are both incomplete explanations.

The Social Norms of Political Conformity

Instead, Putin's power can be seen as "co-constructed": continually reinforced by the beliefs and behaviors of others, from the country's political and economic elite through to ordinary citizens. This is not the same as democratic participation. Co-construction is not just a matter of actively supporting Putin's policies; instead, acceptance of the leadership has become a widespread social norm, and is seen as the socially appropriate set of attitudes in contemporary Russian society.[1] There are social pressures, not only political ones, to adhere to these norms.

This argument shifts the emphasis in explaining Russian power away from structure and back—at least somewhat—towards agent-centric explanations. In our view, the decisions that people make—and the interpretations that people have of those decisions, and of the ensuing actions and reactions—matter as much or more than what might be seen as structural elements in the state-society relationship, such as the long-term relationship between economic performance and support, cultural elements, historical elements, and other less dynamic, less human, and less social factors. While Putin's popularity and ability to win elections facilitates his rule—both by lessening the system's reliance on costly and risky coercion and by making him more useful to elites, whose privilege and unaccountability are protected by his legitimacy—the crux of his power is the perception by millions of Russians that it is to their advantage—politically, economically and socially—to support him and, to a degree, to do his bidding.

This interpretation of Russian society makes use of social psychology, and specifically Social Identity Theory.[2] SIT posits that the status of belonging to a group includes such dynamics as in-group favoritism—we want to think of our group as superior to others—and secure and insecure identities, which relates to group hierarchies. When the perceptions of a group standing in a specific hierarchy is stable and legitimate (hard to change) – then social identity is deemed secure, but when that hierarchy is seen as changing, unstable, or illegitimate, the social identity is considered insecure.

Through this lens, a narrative of Russian victimhood—emphasizing the threat from the West, the chaos of the 1990s, and the tenuous hold on stability and order—is a construction of insecure identity, suggesting that Russia’s and Russians’ status is constantly at risk. On the shoulders of this is the narrative that Putin is securing Russian identity by advancing Russia’s position in the world. In this way, Putin has succeeded in placing himself at the center of Russia’s quest for identity. Indices of public moods, social optimism, and faith in Russia’s future support this framework, with a significant rise in all indicators, as well as Putin’s popularity skyrocketing, in the aftermath of the Crimea annexation in particular—a moment when Russian identity could be seen as attaining a new level of security and a boost in the global hierarchy.[3] This has been called the “Crimean consensus.”[4]

Co-Construction and Regime Durability

Conventional wisdom holds that Putin runs a strict command-and-control hierarchy, or “vertical of power.” Co-construction, however, implies that people are doing Putin’s bidding for their own reasons, rather than for his. This view has multiple consequences. For one thing, it means that the coalitions of interest that in some cases empower Putin can, in other circumstances, hem him in, forcing him to contend with the interests of other important players in the system—including, sometimes, ordinary Russian citizens. For another, it means that self-interested actors are generally guided by their own interpretations of what is in the interests of the system, and even of Putin himself.

Situationally motivated, entrepreneurially experimental, self-interested, and basically autonomous actors “co-construct” Putin’s power precisely because they act in what they understand to be Putin’s interests without having to be told to do so. The result is a peculiar kind of durability. A co-constructed system of power is likely to be impervious to outside attempts to encourage change by driving a wedge between the elite and the president, because elites are acting in their own interests. But by the same token, as these various actors come to see established courses of action as politically and economically profitable, it becomes harder for the Kremlin itself to shift approaches.

Thus, a careful analysis of how the Kremlin has responded to various challenges—ranging from economic stagnation, the Bolotnaia protests of 2011-12, and the resurgent opposition movement in 2019, to the Euro-aidan, war in Ukraine and the emergence of heated confrontation with the West, complicates the “Putin is in complete control” story, for it must take these social norms and broader societal actions into account. Whether doing battle with the opposition at home, with the Ukrainian military or with Western sanctions, it is evident just how much work the Kremlin has to do just to stay in control of its own agenda – and even then, its success is less than complete. We see processes that are rich in self-interested agents and their actions, and that cannot easily be explained unless we under-

stand the ways in which the multiple contesting actors shape one another's behavior.

Policy Recommendations

The conclusion that Russian power is co-constructed has, we believe, four key implications for Western policymakers.

1. Western policymakers need to understand that Russian policy decisions are situational. Any course of policy action pursued by the Kremlin will be guided by two paramount aims: the maintenance of power and maximal maneuverability in the service of that power. Other policy priorities or decisions are inherently and inevitably subsidiary to those overarching values. As a result, decisionmakers within the Russian system are compelled to have these priorities in mind, as does the Kremlin when deciding where to seek conflict, where to pursue compromise, and how to invest.

This means that Western observers and policymakers must evaluate anything that appears to be a Russian policy objective in the context of these questions. If we assume that Russia's aim is "to undermine Western democracy," then we need to understand how and why such a policy serves the overriding aims of maximizing power and maneuverability. An approach that keeps those aims in mind should allow Western policymakers better to understand the cost-benefit analysis from the perspective of their Russian counterparts, and hence the conditions that favor such a policy, remembering that those conditions may change.

2. Western policymakers should remember that Russian policy decisions are often experimental or improvised. We often ascribe more foresight and analysis to the Russian system than is borne out by the evidence. For example, the use of ideological wedge issues to regain the initiative against the Bolotnaia opposition, and even the annexation of Crimea, were plans not fully fleshed out in advance. This makes decisionmakers initially conservative, sticking to tried-and-trusted solutions and militating against fixing what isn't broken. When forced to change tack, they tend to take a broad-side approach, firing multiple cannons at multiple targets to see where a dent can be made.

Seen from this perspective, many positions that might appear ideologically driven begin to look more like pragmatic responses to threats and opportunities, with commitment underpinned not by orthodoxy, dogma, or gestalt, but by calculated caution and bureaucratic inertia. This forces us to question the extent to which Russia is wedded to long-term, globally encompassing courses of action, and to consider broader methods of response if this is the case.

3. Similarly, Western policymakers need to understand the coalitional nature of Russian power. This requires being skeptical of assumptions

that courses of action—including, crucially, the presence of multiple Russian actors in American politics—are pursued on the orders of the Kremlin, or even always with the Kremlin’s prior knowledge.

4. If there is one overarching policy implication, it is probably this: Fruitful engagement with Russia—engagement that would restore strategic stability, end Moscow’s dismemberment of Ukraine, and calm nerves about its intervention in our own politics—will require a whole-of-Russia approach. Rather than trying to adjust the narrow calculations of small groups of supposedly key people, Western governments should strive to alter the ways in which Russians of all walks of life and socio-economic stations factor the West into their lives and interests.

Understanding Russian power as co-constructed does not in and of itself yield a series of policy prescriptions. Rather, it suggests a different approach to analysis, one that we believe can help reduce the number of costly policy mistakes made by Western governments, and hopefully reduce the amount of unhelpful hyperbole and distortion in public and policy debates. With greater awareness of the co-constructed aspects of Russian power and the role of society and public moods in shaping the system, policymakers should be better equipped to respond to the complexities of Russian policy.

References

- [1] The full story of co-construction is elaborated in our book, *Putin v the People: The Perilous Politics of a Divided Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), especially pp. 1-13.
- [2] For the application of this theory to Russia's foreign policy see Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, *Quest for Status: Chinese and Russian Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); and Anne L. Clunan, *The Social Construction of Russia's Resurgence: Aspirations, Identity, and Security Interests* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).
- [3] Index of social moods, Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM). 2005-2018. <https://wciom.com/types-of-research/open-projects/index-of-social-moods/>.
- [4] See, for instance, Ben Noble, "The State Duma, the 'Crimean Consensus,' and Volodin's reforms," in Olga Irisova, Anton Barbashin, Fabian Burkhardt, and Ernest Wyciszkievicz (eds.), *A Successful Failure: Russia after Crime(a)* (Warsaw: Centre Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding, 2017); on its aftermath, see Konstantin Gaaze, "Why Russia's Crimean Consensus is Over (And What Comes Next)," Carnegie Moscow Center, September 21, 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/77310>.