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## Stability and Fragility in Contemporary Russian Politics

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**Fig. 1.1** Navalny mural being painted over by St. Petersburg municipal worker, April 28, 2021. Credit: Anton Vagonov / Reuters / Alamy Stock Photo.

It's all in your hands!

Lyubov Sobol, "Pora deistvovat"

### Abstract

Contemporary Russian political dynamics are shaped by exceptionally strong conservative forces that stabilize a prevailing order, but also contain many sources of potential destabilization and change. By the beginning of 2022, Russia's political order was dominated by President Vladimir Putin and his loyalists within formal institutions, such as United Russia, and informal networks of power led by political

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and economic elites. There are no political actors who are both powerful and critical of this order, which has been called “high Putinism.” A majority of citizens supported the concentration of power over the previous two decades and contributed to its consolidation through their beliefs and actions. All major channels of communication are firmly controlled by actors committed to disseminating the value, even necessity, of the current order. This highly centralized political order made it possible for Putin to launch a brutal and wholesale war on Ukraine in February 2022. Over the course of the past decade, three key pillars of support for the political current order and the war have been strengthened: (i) the state’s ability to instrumentalize formal institutions to prolong Putin’s and United Russia’s hold on power, (ii) the fact that the state controls virtually all media outlets, and (iii), finally, the government’s ability to generate relative economic prosperity. The war and sanctions are acutely threatening Russia’s economy, and have led to a crackdown on the last remaining independent media outlets.

Whether or not this political constellation will turn out to be stable or fragile depends in large part on whether citizens continue to support Putin. An increasingly assertive foreign policy toward the West had bought high approval ratings for some years. Despite its virtual monopoly over the levers of power, the Putin government has been increasingly afraid of street protest and has gone to great lengths to silence a small but vocal opposition, led by Alexei Navalny. Discontent stemming from failing institutions, pervasive corruption, mounting inequality, and economic hardship has the potential to undermine the balance between stability and fragility in contemporary Russian politics. The outcome of the war in Ukraine will certainly be a watershed moment, although we do not yet know how the war will end. The future of Russian politics will hinge on answers to the question whether Russian citizens will continue to support the Putin government, even with mounting economic and human costs of the war.

### 1.1 “It’s All in Your Hands!” . . . Or Is It?

On September 17, 2021, on the eve of Russia’s tense 2021 parliamentary elections, **Lyubov Sobol**, one of Russia’s leading opposition leaders, had a message for Russian citizens. “The future of our country depends on you,” she pleaded via a video message disseminated on YouTube. Not on the president, whose name she did not actually mention, not on **United Russia**, the dominant party, not on bureaucrats, or on the FSB, the country’s security service. Sobol is a close ally of **Alexei Navalny**, who nearly died in 2020 after a politically motivated poisoning and was imprisoned at the time of the elections. A few things were remarkable about Sobol’s plea: First, she charted the path to change as a simple one – citizens could use a right they had,

that is, the right to vote. Go vote, she said, for the candidate who has the strongest chance of winning against United Russia, also known as the “party of power,” which has loyally approved all laws favored by the Kremlin. Navalny and Sobol’s organization had in fact developed an app that citizens could download, *smart.vote* (*umnoe golosovanie*) that identified these candidates in all voting precincts; many were members of the Communist Party, with no affiliation to Navalny’s network. Secondly, she justified the urgency of citizens taking action by bringing up a range of issues that Russians care about – inflation, pensions and salaries, the ailing healthcare system, schools, roads with potholes, and, finally, the dishes that families could afford to serve for New Year, Russia’s most important holiday. Change, and the future of all of these issues, she urged citizens, is “all in your hands” (*vse v vashe rukakh*).

To perhaps no one’s surprise, the 2021 parliamentary elections turned out to be skewed in favor of United Russia. The *smart.vote* app was removed from Apple’s and Google’s app stores, and from the Russian messaging platform Telegram, just days before the elections, as these companies yielded to pressure from the Russian government. Evidence of irregularities and fraud surfaced in the aftermath. In Moscow and St. Petersburg, candidates supported by the *smart.vote* initiative seemed to have won the majority of districts, but early leads were erased as the results from the country’s controversial electronic voting system were tallied. Protests on the day after the elections were small; they had been prohibited by authorities due to COVID-related prohibitions on large gatherings. The official result was that United Russia won 324 out of 450 seats (72 percent) in the Russian Duma. Vladimir Putin and the party of power had consolidated their hold on the country’s political institutions. Russia’s war on Ukraine, which started on February 24, 2022, made clear that power and authority had indeed been extremely concentrated in preceding years.

Sobol’s plea and the outcome of the 2021 elections may appear to be proof that citizen action is futile and that the channels of democratic accountability are incapable of shaking the solid foundation of power. These events stand for more than that, however, because they raise the question: Who can effect change, and how? In 2022, with Ukraine under siege, these questions are more urgent than ever before.

If we look closely at the events surrounding the 2021 elections, we learn a few important lessons about Russian politics over the past thirty years. The notion that citizens are stewards of their own future, of course, runs counter to the conviction of foreign and Russian observers that the Russian state, with Vladimir Putin at its helm, is principally in charge of charting the country’s path. Yet, Putin’s leadership is not unopposed even today, when presidential power is arguably as strong as it has ever been over the past thirty years. Though the Russian political system concentrates power in the executive, and mechanisms of popular accountability

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are nearly absent, parliamentary politics still matter and citizens' votes confer legitimacy on those in public office. And, while Putin's insistence on Russia's great power status and the stoking of patriotism and traditional values have resonated, everyday problems of citizens remain salient political concerns. The far-reaching sanctions that were imposed in February and March 2022 had an immediate and crippling effect on the Russian economy. We also learned that the opposition's use of social media, and in particular a new technology and the information it disseminated, actually helped sway citizens. In 2021, the government deemed the smart.vote app threatening enough to lean on Apple, Google, and Telegram. In 2022, new laws were passed to criminalize anyone opposing the war on any media platform.

Up until February 2022, it seemed that a broader range of political, social, and economic actors played a role in contemporary Russian politics than we might glean from a typical news report on Russia, which tends to take for granted that Putin presides over every move on the chessboard of Russian politics as a grand master. The war in Ukraine will be a watershed in Russian politics. On the one hand, the attack on Ukraine seems to have been initiated by an increasingly isolated president. State-controlled media are uniform in disseminating a narrative that emanates from the Kremlin – calling the war a “special operation” to liberate Ukraine from Western occupation. On the other hand, even in this extreme situation, it is still the case that Vladimir Putin relies on support from political and economic elites and the broader public.

To understand contemporary Russian politics, this book suggests that we need to depart from a Kremlin- or Moscow-centered view of Russian politics and take a closer look at how politics appears from multiple perspectives and geographical locations, and what motivates a variety of political, social, and economic actors. Only if we gain a better understanding of the urgency of citizens' changing needs and the tools and strategies of both the Putin government and a savvy and resilient opposition will we get a better idea of the stability and fragility of **Putinism**. The next sections of this chapter (1.2–1.5) introduce key sources of stability and fragility and locate them in the context of the past thirty years of Russian history. Section 1.6 addresses how Russia's search for a position in global politics and global markets has influenced domestic trends. It bears noting that, while the focus in this book is primarily on domestic politics and socioeconomic trends and actors, Russia's foreign politics and the country's integration into global markets played an important role throughout this period. The former receives a dedicated chapter in Part I of the book, and the latter is the background for chapters in Part II of the book. The final sections of this chapter, 1.7 and 1.8, provide an overview of the book and conclude by addressing the changing nature of Russia's political regime.

## 1.2 Thumbnail Sketch of Thirty Tumultuous Years

The year 2021 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the official dissolution of the Soviet Union on New Year's Eve 1991. Since the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the Soviet Union's social, economic, and political order represented the twentieth century's most important alternative to liberal democracy and capitalism. Social progress and industrial modernity were the goals, while establishing a **planned economy** and a **Leninist party** was the path pursued by Soviet leaders for more than seven decades. By the 1980s, it had become increasingly clear that central planning could not keep up with rapidly evolving consumer expectations. In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev initiated *perestroika*, a series of reforms that were meant to decentralize the economy and democratize political decisionmaking. The planned economy, however, was exceedingly difficult to transform because it was both extremely hierarchical and made up of a myriad of informal practices and networks. Instead of improving economic efficiency, the reforms exacerbated shortages and worsened the economic situation for many Russians. Meanwhile, another set of reforms, *glasnost*, was meant to bring more transparency to contemporary and historical events, especially the terror and human toll of the Stalin years. *Glasnost* contributed to the blossoming of civil society and reexamination of Soviet-era atrocities, but this in turn led to an acceleration of independence movements by ethnic and national minorities, who were increasingly unwilling to see their future determined in Moscow. Gorbachev had attempted to reform the Soviet-era system of governance to make it more responsive to citizens' needs, but rapidly unfolding events overtook his ability to transform the socialist system. The Soviet Union collapsed and ceased to exist in 1991, when its constituent republics (the former soviet socialist republics, SSRs) declared their independence, led by Lithuania and Georgia in the spring of that year, followed a few months later by Estonia, Latvia, Belarus, and Ukraine.

The **Russian Federation**, along with each of its new neighbors, was then faced with the exceedingly challenging task of building institutions that could govern the newly independent countries. The Cold War had contributed to the widespread perception that socialism and capitalist democracy were competing opposites. The collapse of communism in the Soviet Union, and with it the principal competing social order of the twentieth century, buoyed the "end-of-history thesis," shaping expectations in Russia and abroad that formerly socialist countries would now proceed to converge toward more democratic governance and capitalist markets. Although there were disagreements and a great deal of uncertainty about how precisely the reconstruction of an entire social, political, and economic order would proceed, it was quite clear that what was ahead was a historic

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transformation of the fundamental institutions of the state, the economy, and society. The country's constitution, voting and party system, markets for goods and services, and property rights, along with a myriad of other institutions, rules, and laws, had to be redrafted more or less from scratch. It soon became clear that, rather than the somewhat mysterious forces of convergence, the process of institution-building in post-Soviet Russia was profoundly shaped by Soviet and prerevolutionary history, along with the domestic and international political dynamics that unfolded in the early 1990s.

The historical background of the Soviet-era precedents and Boris Yeltsin's presidency in the 1990s were crucially important, and each of the chapters that follow details how they shaped contemporary Putinism. The main purpose of this introductory chapter is to lay out a conceptual framework centered on **stability and fragility**. Unlike in other textbooks on Russian politics, the democracy–autocracy continuum is not the master narrative of this book, although regime dynamics are addressed in the conclusion of this chapter. The approach chosen here is that each chapter details how particular elements of democratic governance initially emerged and then faltered. With the emphasis on the concepts of stability and fragility, *Russian Politics Today* offers a template with which to assess an inherent and often-neglected dynamism in Russian politics. It teaches students to identify sources of stability and fragility, thereby equipping them not only with a grounded and informed understanding of Russian politics today, but also with a tool to reassess political dynamics as the country's future unfolds.

### 1.3 Stability and Fragility

Russian politics has always contained both exceptionally strong **conservative forces** that stabilize a prevailing order and many sources of potential destabilization. This was no less true in 1917, on the eve of Russia's **October Revolution** that defined the country's history to this day, than it was in 2021, when multiple grievances and the increasingly stifling authoritarianism of the Putin era brought thousands of protesters to the streets. In the years leading up to the Bolshevik Revolution, Russia had been embroiled in a costly war abroad and its citizens at home were divided between those who were hungry and those who were not. The promise of peace and bread made by the Bolshevik revolutionaries, and by **Vladimir Lenin** as their leader, proved to be enough to destabilize the imperial order and usher in its collapse in 1917. In retrospect, the late imperial and late Soviet regimes were more brittle than they appeared in the years before these two episodes of cataclysmic change. A similar kind of fragility also characterized the Soviet social and political order, which unraveled as outlined above, when Mikhail Gorbachev initiated reforms that loosened central control and opened the airwaves for genuine

public discourse. Twice, then, in relatively recent memory, Russia found that an apparently solid and strong social order was more fragile than it appeared; or, to rely on Alexei Yurchak's cogent words, "everything was forever, until it was no more" (Yurchak 2005).

Today, Russia's political order is sustained through formal institutions that centralize power in the executive, powerful informal networks among politicians, economic, and media elites, rents from the hydrocarbon sectors, and the cultural clout of the **Russian Orthodox Church**. At the same time, poverty and rising inequality, discrimination against those who do not fit the mold of nationalist and religiously conservative Russia, and various (often local) grievances have the potential to destabilize Putin's Russia, making the current order more fragile than it appears. Each of these dynamics – that is, the sources of regime resilience and vulnerability – has a history and current manifestations. This chapter introduces some of the main pillars of stability and potential fragilities in contemporary Russian politics that are detailed in later chapters.

## 1.4 Forces of Stability

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin has occupied the apex of Russian political power and shaped Russian politics for more than two decades. After a career in the KGB (the Soviet secret service), Putin, then aged forty-seven, was handed the reins of power and government by an ailing President Boris Yeltsin on New Year's Eve 1999. The 1990s had been a perilous decade for most Russian citizens; a decade that had started with exuberant hope for a better future and more comfortable lives quickly became marked by economic hardship, the rise of physical violence, and a profound sense of disorientation that stemmed from the disappearance of the Soviet Union (Woodruff 1999; Volkov 2016, Oushakine 2009). By 1999, it had become increasingly obvious that the state's authority was exceedingly weak and that Boris Yeltsin was unable to solve the many big and small problems that Russians faced. Vladimir Putin promised to restore order and strengthen the state to bring prosperity to Russians in the new millennium. In the years that followed, the president moved swiftly to centralize political authority, to regain control over valuable economic assets, and to implement reforms that had been proposed in the 1990s but never carried out. Control and centralization of formal institutions went hand in hand with the development of informal and personalistic networks of power; in aggregate these have been called **patronalism** (Hale 2014) or *sistema*, "the system" (Ledeneva 2013). Patronal networks comprise a complex and dynamic set of informal institutions that channel resources and appoint cadres. High-ranking members of the military, the secret service, and the police, collectively known as the *siloviki* (literally "people of force" or "strongmen"), are especially influential in many of

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these informal and hierarchical networks, but others are led by Russia's new oligarchs, only some of whom are connected to *siloviki* circles.

While the Yeltsin years were marked by centrifugal forces that undermined the central government's ability to initiate reforms that state-building and market construction called for, the early Putin years saw reassertion and strengthening of the institutions of the state. Meanwhile, the first decade of the new millennium saw buoyant oil prices and an economic recovery, which led to higher household incomes and allowed the state to improve social spending and to raise pensions and state-sector salaries. Though Putin officially gave up the formal office of the president to Dmitry Medvedev between 2008 and 2012, he was reelected after these four years. The political order he has established since then has been exceptionally durable. In contemporary Russia, there are virtually no political actors who are both powerful and critical of the president and his inner circle, forming a political order that has been called "high Putinism" (Sharafutdinova 2020). A number of parties, including the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), Rodina, and the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, hold seats in the Duma and in regional parliaments, but they have not opposed United Russia's agenda in any meaningful way. The most vocal and committed group of Putin critics is led by Alexei Navalny and his team, whom the Putin administration calls the "nonsystemic" opposition. Navalny has tried to unify a large, but loosely organized set of local groups and independent political actors capable of channeling discontent.

Despite mounting concerns about elite corruption and nearly a decade of slower economic growth, many Russians support the order that Putin created, either because they approve of the president himself or because they do not think any other leader would be capable of leading the country into the future. The most important pillars of the current order are:

- the **superpresidency** – institutions that centralize power in the executive branch;
- the state-controlled media that have conveyed the perspective of the Kremlin; and
- a mixed economy that has brought relative prosperity and economic security for many Russian citizens.

### 1.4.1 The Superpresidency

A central pillar of the durability of Putinism lies in the extraordinary formal and informal power residing in the executive branch, known as Russia's superpresidency (see Chapter 2). The Russian Federation is formally a semi-presidential political system, and the constitution divides power among the three branches of government and horizontally distributes authority between the federal center and regional administrations. Yet, since the Yeltsin presidency, Russian leaders have decisively altered these arrangements, centralizing power and striving to establish what is



called the “power vertical” (*vertikal’ vlasti*). The chapters that follow detail many instances and examples of how Vladimir Putin instrumentalized the formal powers of his office to strengthen his hold on power. An early turning point was a 2004 law that abolished direct elections of regional governors, instead giving the Russian president the right to appoint them. The law was passed swiftly by both chambers of the Russian legislature, before being signed by the president; it was not challenged by the Constitutional Court, even though it ostensibly violated the rights of Russia’s regions granted by the constitution. A few years earlier, in 2000, seven new administrative regions had been created, each headed by a newly appointed leader, the *polpred*, directly chosen by and accountable only to the president’s office. Perhaps the most blatant example of the president’s reliance on instrumentalizing institutions to extend his hold on power was the constitutional amendment passed by the Duma in 2020 that lengthened the presidential term, allowing Putin to stay in office until 2036.

Over the past twenty years, many steps have contributed to the strengthening of Putin’s hold on the executive branch. What is more, formal institutions have served in various ways to eliminate critics and possible opponents. They have been used against oligarchs, most notoriously against Mikhail Khodorkovsky (former owner of Yukos, Russia’s largest oil company in the 1990s, which produces approximately 20 percent of Russia’s oil output), as well as against Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky, both of whom emerged as media tycoons in the same decade. These and many other oligarchs were convicted of tax fraud and corporate wrongdoing, and either jailed or forced to flee Russia. Laws have also been used to arrest protesters and therefore suppress the expression of societal discontent. The members of the punk rock band Pussy Riot, an outspoken and courageous group of artists, were convicted under a law against hooliganism for the unsanctioned performance of a critical punk rock song in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior. In 2013, in the aftermath of their trial, a new law against blasphemy made slights of religious believers a criminal offense. The same year, legislation known as the “gay propaganda” law was passed to prohibit the distribution of information related to “non-traditional sexual orientation,” ostensibly to protect children from being exposed to information that undermines traditional family values. This law, too, has been widely used as a tool to discourage and crack down on societal critiques of Putin’s nationalist and traditionalist agenda. Finally, since 2020 the Russian state has frequently referred to COVID-19–related restrictions on large gatherings to arrest participants of street protests critical of Putin.

### 1.4.2 State-Controlled Media

A second powerful tool that strengthens the Putin government is control of the country’s media, especially TV channels, which are the main source of news and information for most Russian citizens. The collapse of the Soviet Union and, with it,

the state's monopoly on the ownership of the news media created a whole new media landscape in Russia, with many new print publications and TV channels founded by enthusiastic media entrepreneurs and backed by oligarchic capital.

Journalists and owners of these news outlets provided critical coverage of some of the postcommunist period's most catastrophic events, such as the war in Chechnya, the sinking of the *Kursk* submarine, and the Beslan hostage crisis. It gradually became clear, however, that these media outlets often reflected the interests of their oligarchic owners, especially when it came to whitewashing their role in the property struggles through which they had accumulated vast fortunes (see Chapter 17). When Putin became president, the government sought to reclaim the state's control of media outlets. One of Russia's main TV channels, NTV, had not backed Putin in the 2000 presidential election. In the spring of 2001, the channel's owner, Vladimir Gusinsky, was arrested and subsequently forced to flee Russia, and his media empire was taken over by Gazprom, the state-owned energy company. Along with NTV, Putin seized control of Channel One (formerly ORT), which in the 1990s was formally state-owned but de facto had been controlled by the oligarch Boris Berezovsky. Together with a third national television network, Rossiia-1, these channels provided increasingly bland and noncritical media coverage during the first decade of the 2000s.

A few islands of independent media, such as the radio station Ekho Moskvyy, the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, and the TV station Dozhd, survived for some time, though they reached only a small segment of liberal urbanites. Meanwhile, however, the number of internet and social media users exploded. By 2011, the opposition had realized that social media could be an indispensable tool in coordinating protests against election fraud and corruption.

After Putin reclaimed the presidency in 2012, the state's control of Russia's media expanded further. The owner of VKontakte, Russia's main social media platform, was forced to sell the network to Alisher Usmanov, an oligarch close to and loyal to the Kremlin. The editors-in-chief of several high-profile media outlets that had maintained some independence were fired or resigned under pressure; these included the editor of the respected business daily *Vedomosti* and the editor of Lenta.ru, until then Russia's top news website. (Galina Timchenko, Lenta.ru's editor, and many of her staff members subsequently founded Meduza, an online media venture based in Latvia that is one of the few remaining independent media outlets covering Russian news.)

Although many Russian journalists are highly skilled professionals, most TV and print media do not see their role as an independent fourth estate, counterbalancing the powers of government. Throughout the mass protests in Ukraine in 2013, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Russian-controlled separatist movement in eastern Ukraine, and most recently the all-out war on Ukraine, Russia's media have provided a uniform message for citizens that reflects the Kremlin's nationalist and aggressive rhetoric. Not only did Russian state-controlled media avoid any criticism