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Putin's Law of Repression May Force His Demise

By Lilia Shevtsova

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The Kremlin did not waste any time this summer preparing for the next protest wave. Putin's latest invention is a real political perversion. Law and justice have been abused as an instrument of personalized power. His team has been desperately endorsing a new package of repressive legislation to legitimize future coercion. Putin has now made servile courts the foundation of one-man rule.

In 2003, the arrest of former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky signified Russia's turn toward state capitalism. This year, the trial and sentence of three members of the punk group Pussy Riot showed how authoritarianism was transformed into personalized power with the potential to acquire elements of dictatorship.

Will the Kremlin succeed to preserve its power using selective force, or will it need to resort to all-out violence?

Three factors come together to create the moment of truth for a political regime when it has to choose between a peaceful transfer of power and force: large protests, fragmentation of the ruling elite and outside pressure. For the time being, these conditions are still rather vague. This may create the impression that the status quo can be prolonged for an indefinite period and that it does not require a broader use of force. But there are two other variables that determine the behavior of the Kremlin: the nature of the regime and the mentality of its leader.

Russia's security agencies are not only free of civil control but have actually established their own regime. This regime has nothing in common with U.S. political scientist Francis Fukuyama's praetorian realism, which defines the scenario for imposing order on civil chaos, nor with U.S. political scientists Robert Springborg and Clement Henry's matrix realism, similarly emphasizing the army's role in the institutionalization of the Arab states, nor former Chilean leader Augusto Pinochet's praetorian modernization. The Russian Praetorians — members of the security services who have become wealthy beneficiaries of the petro state —have another purpose altogether. They pursue their corporate interests at any price that sooner or later will push them to full-scale brutality.

President Vladimir Putin has consistently shown over the past decade that he believes in macho rule and will resist at all costs being viewed as a weak leader. This suggests that Putin's Kremlin will not be willing to surrender power peacefully.

There are even more doubts that Putin's Kremlin will be satisfied with selective use of force. Russian pundits often argue that the regime will have to balance coercion with a desire to guarantee the ruling elite's personal integration into the West, which means that the regime will have to check its aggressive nature. But this is an erroneous assumption.

To prevent the opposition movement from spreading and gaining force, the Kremlin will have to increase its use of force. If the threat of force is not followed by the actual use of force, this will be viewed by the opposition and hardline members of the ruling elite as the regime's weakness. Thus, both the increase of force, as well as its softening, could trigger a new wave of protest.

The Kremlin's turn toward increased repression has four main implications. First, it consolidates the traditionalists who found legitimacy in fundamentalist orthodoxy. They make up only about 15 percent of the population, but they are becoming more vocal and aggressive. To keep them mobilized, the regime will need to satisfy their appetites. If the state sides with traditionalists, it could provoke a confrontation likely to escalate into the country's implosion.

Second, the regime's evolution is frustrating for the moderates among the ruling elite, who felt comfortable creating a imitation democracy — one that allowed them to appear liberal and to be accepted in the West. They are against an outright repressive regime, and they already see Putin as a liability.

Third, the Kremlin's turn toward the use of force proves that the system can't be changed peacefully from the top. This leaves only one possibility for change: revolution, which in Russia usually brings even more repressive forces to power.

Fourth, Russian history shows that a turn toward coercion after liberal hopes have been dashed could push the most active and young segments of society toward violence and terror, which is exactly what happened at the end of the 19th century.

Russia demonstrates the unintended consequences of the law of repression. It can work only when the coercion is justified by ideology and when siloviki are loyal to their leader. The Kremlin can't force society to accept the use of force just to preserve Putin's hold on power. What's more, there is no guarantee that the corrupt siloviki will remain loyal to their leader.

By applying repressive instruments, Putin's Kremlin has admitted that other means of securing power are not working. This means that the regime has entered a stage of instability. We may see serious political and social upheaval if forces within this matrix — and even within Putin's regime — try to use the protests to build another authoritarian regime under the slogan of a struggle against corruption and Putin, while preserving the principle of personalized power.

In the end, Putin's repressive rule could easily speed up his demise, but Russia still faces a formidable challenge: burying the Russian matrix and building an alternative to personalized rule.

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