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Putin's Leadership Trap

By Vladimir Frolov

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When elected president in 2000, Vladimir Putin's first order of business seemed straightforward: strengthen the Russian state and bring it back from oligarchic control and regional warlordism. Consolidation was in order.

There were two ways to achieve that.

One way was taking a low view of human nature and would have required rebuilding formal political institutions to increase their capacity for checking power-grabbing appetites of politicians. This would have meant an emphasis on formal rules and procedures and their strict observance by all levels of government. Transparent rules and their unbiased enforcement would have guarded the state against destructive influences. Free and fair elections and equal justice under the law would have been central to the regime's legitimacy.

The alternative way was to build a highly personalized system of power that relies heavily on personal relationships and shadowy deals enforced through a selective application of informal and constantly changing rules. This required making the presidency, with

the multiple security agencies at its disposal, politically dominant, while consistently gutting the power and legitimacy of all other state institutions. Elections would have to be tightly managed to guard against unplanned outcomes.

To be fair, Putin in 2000 was facing a situation where some institutions did not work, while others were captured by groups openly hostile to him. He viewed the institutions he did not personally control as likely threats to his rule.

He set out to use what Alyona Ledeneva of University College in London and author of the forthcoming book "Can Russia Modernize?" calls "informal governance" — personal networks and relationships, friends and loyalists in key positions and street-gang bargaining — to achieve the desired outcomes that could not be obtained through formal channels.

But what was initially intended as stop-gap measures to enact badly needed reforms, quickly acquired a logic of expanding the president's power through arbitrary, informal rules.

This logic views supreme power as flowing down from the popular elected leader to other political institutions who aspire to legitimacy while serving as little more than decorations. With decisions taken at the very top and objectives secured through informal instruments of governance, public institutions could simply imitate their constitutional functions.

Thus, the parliament does not legislate on its own but only adopts those initiatives that have been supported or introduced by the presidential administration, reducing the legislators' role to a rubber-stamp formality. Putin's 2010 off-the-cuff remark that he had thought of disbanding the State Duma at the height of the economic crisis in 2009 to expedite his anti-crisis measures demonstrates that public institutions are expendable if they stand in his way.

The end result: Inefficiency permeates state institutions. Unused, or undermined, formal institutions become weak and atrophy. They bleed competent workers. People shun them as they seek to serve their needs through informal networks of governance.

The country falls into what Ledeneva calls the "modernization trap of informality," or, simply put, when there are no effective people you can trust to run the country. The informal networks become unmanageable, loyalties corrupted, results diminished, and the nation's long-term vision is undermined.

Today, Putin is trying to make his system of informal governance more efficient. The war on corruption, the "nationalization of the elites," the People's Front are all tools to boost the projection of his power through informal instruments. The People's Front, for example, has the grim potential for supplanting all formal political institutions by creating a pretense of direct popular rule by an attentive national leader. The trap of informality becomes inescapable.

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