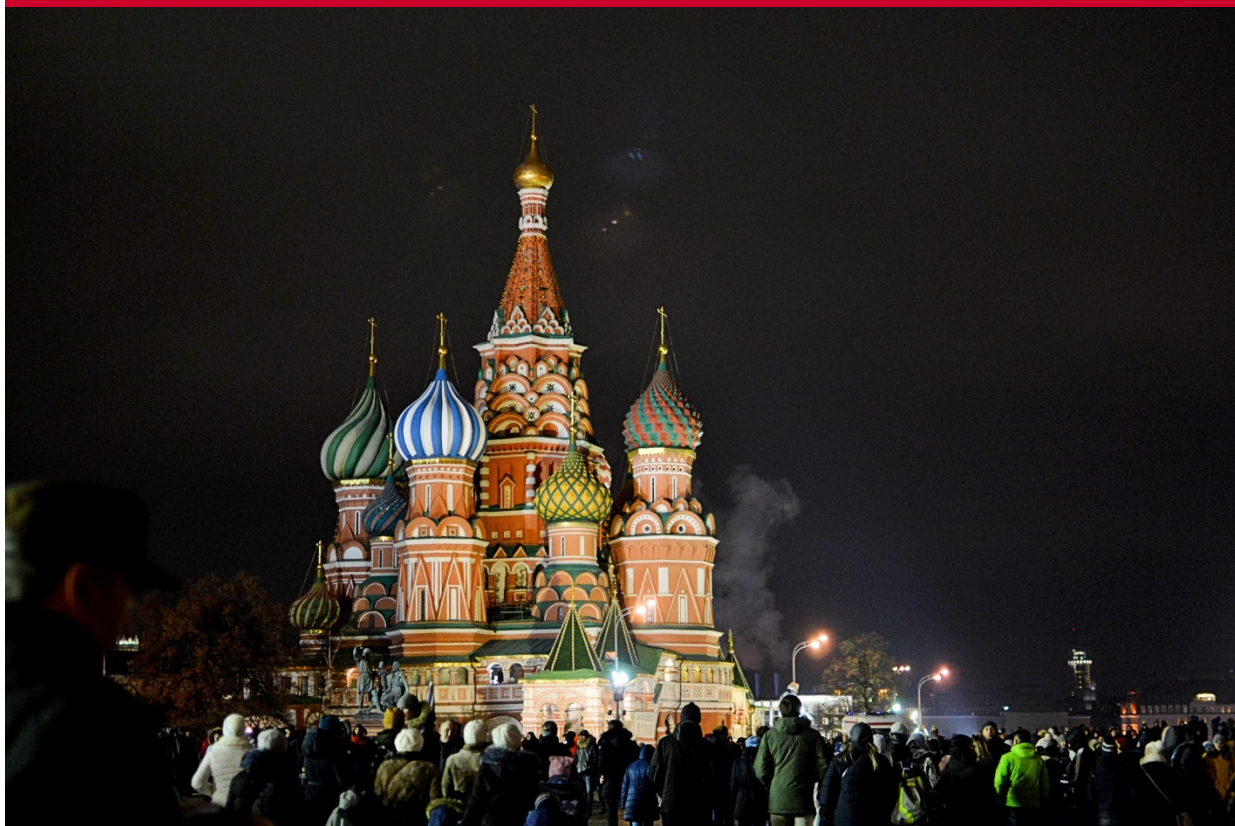


Centre d'étude des crises et conflits internationaux



The Russian Elite in the post-Putin Era

Marie Brancaleone

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INTRODUCTION

Research on the current Russian regime focus too often on Vladimir Putin himself, his personality, his popularity, his wealth and his power. However, the more we advance in time, the more important the persons around the president and their influence on the executive power become. Indeed, one of the legacies of Vladimir Putin's presidency is the re-empowerment of the state bureaucracy and its elites (Sestanovich, 2020). The balance between the elite fractions within the Russian regime is one of the elements that has to be analysed, in order to understand the political transformation that is occurring in Russia today. As a matter of fact, the role of the institutions controlled by the Russian elite – most importantly the military, intelligence, law enforcement and the national economy – will have an impact on the choice of the next president of the Russian Federation but also on the way Russian politics will develop as a whole after Vladimir Putin (Sestanovich, 2020).

Since the rise of Vladimir Putin, it has always been the intention of the Kremlin not to touch the political elite system and this for different reasons. First of all, political change has left some traumas in Russian history. Indeed, Russian leaders have been consistent in being reluctant to rotate the political elite because it happened that the ex-elite joined the opposition several years later – like it was the case under Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin. During the period of tandemocracy between Dmitri Medvedev and Vladimir Putin, it happened again: tensions occurred within the political class (Viktorov, 2014). The main objective of Vladimir Putin in terms of structural systemic change is to try to modify it as little as possible. Therefore, one of his main achievements has been to create a balanced and competitive Russian elite (Tefft, 2020) and to implement a de-concentration of power by appointing his “puppets” in the regions during the last several years. Secondly, Vladimir Putin needs the support of the elite class to remain in power – no matter how long he is planning to stay. Russian history has proven how powerful the elites can be and how vital their support for a government is (Avadliani, 2019). Russia's stability and legitimacy are thus based on a consensus of elite support for Vladimir Putin (Tefft, 2020). This can also be an explanation why personal and informal relations have the primacy, as well as access and loyalty to the president, compared to institutionalised and formal procedure of accession. This state of affairs is not Vladimir Putin's invention, but is deeply rooted in Russian political tradition since the Yeltsin years. In other words, the system of power in which the so-called “Family” – including personal friends and family members – surrounds the president was already in place when Vladimir Putin came to power (Staun, 2007).

However, dissatisfaction and doubt coming from the elite class can endanger the system the president built since 2000. Indeed, the concerns of the elite can lead to the collapse of the system, and even of the state. The best example can be noticed at the end of 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union: the ruling elite – were they Ukrainian, Georgian, Russian or any ethnic origin within the Union – incorporated the idea that the common state had failed and, consequently, they contributed to its collapse (Avadliani, 2019). If we look at the current events in domestic politics, the popular discontent that arose following Aleksey Navalny's case could divide the elite against their president, or the clans against each other. Vladimir Putin is thus developing a counterstrategy: keeping the elite on his side, by balancing their power. The main aim of this paper is to give a brief overview of the elite members influential in contemporary Russia and to reflect on their role in a future post-Putin era.

2. THE WORKING OF THE ELITE SYSTEM IN RUSSIA

As stated earlier, the main problem of the Russian elite system is the importance of informal relations. Indeed, in Russia, the official administrative structures are far less important than interpersonal connections (Stanovaya, 2020). For example, the cabinet member Denis Manturov, who is the current Minister of Industry and Trade, will have less influence than the head of an important Russian state company, like Igor Sechin, who is the current head of the state-owned oil company Rosneft. As a consequence, division of power in Russia is non-existent. Informal groups will undertake the decisional power, and themselves constitute a checks and balance system (Viktorov, 2014). This reality is in total opposition with the legitimacy guaranteed in European democracies, where elected people are gaining legitimacy through elections. In Russia, security, military and also economic agencies have most often the power over the central government (Avadliani, 2019). It is important to recall that, once again, this state of affairs has not been introduced by Vladimir Putin but have been present in Russia for years.

However, one element has been present in Russia through the presidencies but has increased under the rule of the Vladimir Putin: corruption. Since his accession to power, he has put in place a purge in order to “destroy the oligarchs as a class”. The case of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, ex-chief of the Yukos oil company, is the best-known example. Through this purge, Vladimir Putin has tried to install loyalists called the *siloviki* in various positions in society, enhancing the tendency towards personalisation of power and de-institutionalisation. This state of affairs can be defined as a form of “bureaucratic capitalism”, in which the state has the upper hand in several sector, primarily in economic sector by establishing state-controlled corporations and companies, controlled by those loyal *siloviki* (Staun, 2007). Those bureaucrats have to follow the directives of the Kremlin, share its political worldviews, but more importantly to show loyalty to the president. According to Andrei Illarionov, Vladimir Putin’s former chief economic adviser, Russia can be seen as a “corporative state” because the power is concentrated in corporations whose members hold important spheres like the economic, information, political and ideological ones (Staun, 2007). To conclude this topic, we can state that corruption in Russia is not merely a feature of the system, it is the essence of the system, and “tsar” Vladimir Putin, according to Aleksey Navalny, is the first beneficiary of this corrupted system (Navalny, 2021).

A second characteristic of the Russian elite system is the fragmentation of the elite. The ruling elite should not be approached as one single block: there exists different types of schisms. First of all, an ideological schism divides the elite: some figures have become ideologically more radical than Vladimir Putin himself (Stanovaya, 2020). In a country where the question of ideology is so complex, we can acquire more comprehension of the ideological strength of the Russian elite through the concept of belief system, developed by Philip Converse, American political scientist. A belief system is a “configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint or functional independence” (Lussier, 2019). In fact, the belief system of elites is more structured than non-elites, meaning that they have stronger ideological attachments than the public opinion (Lussier, 2019). Moreover, it is precisely on the topic of imperial nostalgia that Vladimir Putin enjoys the largest support of the Russian elite. In recent history, this conservative ideology has been the most felt during the Crimean crisis – when state and citizens were one. Consequently, Vladimir

Putin uses this conservative and nationalistic ideology as a political tool, but most experts agreed on the fact that conservatism is not a true belief in Russia (Viktorov, 2014).

In more practical terms, another schism is the conservative-modernisation schism, which is embodied by the “protectors” on the one side and the younger technocrats on the other. While the group of protectors rather want to preserve conservatism, repression and aggression, the younger generation is in favour of progress, liberalisation and dialogue (Stanovaya, 2020). The demonstrations of 2011 and 2012 planted the seeds toward a formation of a non-Putin elite and population, which would become clearly defined as progressive. The second schism implied thus also the third one: the generational schism. Tensions exists between the young political technocrats supporting Dmitri Medvedev and the older and more authoritarian generation, who supported Vladimir Putin during the Medvedev years (Viktorov, 2014). A fourth and more subtle schism that can be noted among the Russian elite is the position-reputation schism. While some of the elite gain political influence solely thanks to their successful positions in the government, others have political influence outside of their official role, thanks to their ties with Vladimir Putin (Gorenburg, 2020). The influence of the elites of the first group is more variable, because it is their position that offer them power, which means that once they drop off the function, their influence will automatically diminish. The second group is composed of the *siloviki*, who tend to retain influence, regardless of the position they occupy (Gorenburg, 2020).

One of the main fights of the Russian elite is to determine who will have a role in the post-Putin system. They are becoming conscious about the limits of Vladimir Putin’s rule, and thus tend to give less importance to the leader (Stanovaya, 2020). From the outside, the regime composed of those elites looks stable and robust. However, if we look at the inside, crises are building up between the different fractions (Greene, 2019), which will have significant importance in the post-Putin era, discussed in a later stage of the paper.

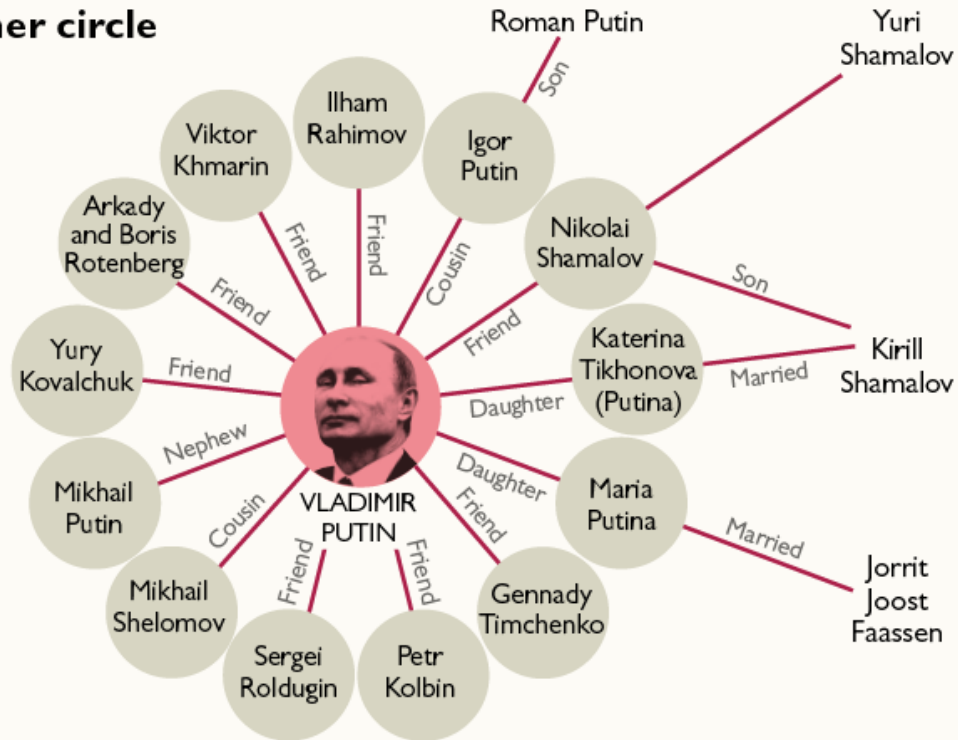
3. A CATEGORISATION OF THE RUSSIAN ELITE

Various important experts in Russian politics have developed different ways to approach the categorisation of the Putin-era political elite. Before discussing the different clans of the Russian elite, we should specify that we understand the Russian elite as “informal groupings of individuals bound by friendship, kinship, common interests, business ties or regional affiliations”¹ (Tefft, 2020).

The following categorisations of the Russian elite will be of three kinds. Firstly, we have the members of Vladimir Putin’s family, who became one of the wealthiest persons of the country. Secondly, the political elite which is composed of elite members who originate from the governmental bureaucracy in St-Petersburg, from the security services or from their personal ties with Vladimir Putin (Gorenburg, 2020). The overview hereunder represents the inner circle of Vladimir Putin, including most importantly his family and closest friends of the KGB and St-Petersburg period. Lastly, the ideological category will be discussed.

¹ Important to note here is that only 10% of the persons in Russia came to power through elections (Tefft, 2020).

The inner circle



Source: *The Times*

Putin's family

As a real autocrat, Vladimir Putin rarely reveals information on his family. Regarding his relationship with women, we know that Vladimir Putin had two children with Lyudmila Putina who died in 2014. He also began a relationship with two other women named Svetlana Krivonogikh and Alina Kabaeva. Common to those two women is that prior to their encounter with Vladimir Putin, they were normal Russian citizens. However, Vladimir Putin made them meet the right people in order to become two of the wealthiest persons in Russia. Svetlana Krivonogikh is nowadays a shareholder at Bank Rossya and has close contacts with Vladimir Putin's friends, among others Yury Kovalchuk who offered her an appartement. Alina Kabaeva also entertains close links with the *siloviki* and, according to Aleksey Navalny's investigation, is involved in the financial investment for Vladimir Putin's palace on the Black Sea (Navalny, 2021). In other words, those women have become rich thanks to their ties with Vladimir Putin, and the *siloviki* have made sure that their family became wealthy.

Vladimir Putin has two daughters, 29-year-old Maria and 28-year-old Ekaterina, but no confirmed photographs exist of their adulthood. His two daughters are reportedly attending university under a false name (Matthews, 2014), and Ekaterina even holds an important senior position at the Moscow State University. However, behind this *incognito* identity, Ekaterina is backed by some of her father's wealthiest friends, according to a research led by Reuters. Indeed, the official advisers of Ekaterina at the university, are in fact members of Vladimir Putin's inner circle, including ex-KGB associates Sergei Chemezov and Nikolai Tokarev, who worked alongside Vladimir Putin in Dresden.

Ekaterina also appeared to be married with Kirill Shamalov, son of Nikolai Shamalov, Vladimir Putin's long-time friend, shareholder of Bank Rossiya (Grey et al., 2015). Ekaterina and Kirill are symbolic for this "New Generation" of Russians, who hold their position thanks to their parents. Her older sisters, Maria, is less known by the public. She reportedly studied biology at St-Petersburg University and medicine at Moscow State University and married a Dutch businessman called Jorrit Joost Faassen. Those information were, however, never confirmed.

Another important figure of the Putin family is Mikhail Shelomov, son of Vladimir Putin's cousin Lyubov Shelomova, whose father is Vladimir Putin's mother Maria Ivanovna Putina's brother. In other words, Mikhail Shelomov is Vladimir Putin's nephew. The story behind the role that his nephew plays is very interesting and symbolic of the mechanisms behind the appointment of the "New Generation" at high position. Originally, Mikhail Shelomov was interested in photography. However, thanks to his ties with the president, he was appointed to the state shopping company called Sovcomflot. Igor Sechin was at that time at the board of the company and was asked by Vladimir Putin to appoint his nephew. Aleksey Navalny held a conversation with one of the workers of the company at that time and asked him what the role of Vladimir Putin's nephew was. He simply explained that he simply kept on making photographs, without occupying a key role in the company. Vladimir Putin's relatives are thus appointed at key positions in important companies to enrich themselves, but not for their competences (Navalny, 2021). He also holds a very important role described by Aleksey Navalny as "wallet holder", meaning that he stands in the shadow but actually holds Vladimir Putin's wealth in shares of large state companies, which are ruled by Vladimir Putin's friends from the *siloviki* (Parfitt, 2017).

The political elite: the siloviki

The most important and influential group among the elite are the *siloviki* or "people of force", translated in Western language as "guys with guns" (Sestanovich, 2020). The *siloviki* arrived together with Vladimir Putin to power in 1999 and must thank their current position to their personal ties with Vladimir Putin before he became president, when he was member of the security services (Viktorov, 2014). This group also includes the "St-Petersburg clan" or the "cronies", which is composed of friends who Vladimir Putin met during his time in St-Petersburg as mayor in the 1990s. Fifteen years later, these men still form Vladimir Putin's core elite and dominate Russia's political lines and big businesses (Monaghan, 2015). Those political figures are responsible – among others – for corrupt and aggressive operations within and outside Russia (Åslund et al., 2017). Indeed, what drives Russia's regime nowadays is the combination of systematic corruption, business and power, embodied in the men of the *siloviki* (Mshvidobadze, 2017).

Their influence has remained high, regardless of the various position they have held. Igor Sechin, for example, chief executive officer of state oil company Rosneft, and close associate of Vladimir Putin, has not seen a decrease in his influence when he left his governmental position in 2012, on the contrary. He remains one of the most influential person in Russia to the present day (Foy & Hille, 2018). The representatives of the *siloviki* can be subdivided into two groups: the ones interested in domestic affairs, and the others who are primarily interested in international and security affairs. Igor Sechin is the most prominent representative of the first fraction, while members like Nikolai Patruchev, former director of the FSB and current Secretary of the Russian Security Council or Sergei Ivanov, former first deputy prime minister and current head of the presidential administration,

constitute the more international and security-minded group of the *siloviki* (Staun, 2007). Among other powerful *siloviki*, we can state Arkady Rotenberg, a business billionaire who co-owns the Stroygazmontazh group, the largest construction company for gas pipelines and electrical power supply lines in Russia, Yury Kovalchuk, business billionaire, who is reputed as Vladimir Putin's banker (Stanovaya, 2020), Sergei Chemezov, head of state-own technology firm Rostec and Nikolai Tokarev, head of state-owned oil company Transneft, both are comrades of Vladimir Putin of his Dresden years (Navalny, 2021) and finally, Gennady Timchenko, who has become one of the wealthiest men, thanks to his trading company Gunvor, and its close relationship to Rosneft (Ross, 2012).

Some of those men have been the core members of Vladimir Putin's inner circle for the last thirty years. However, the *siloviki* should not be studied as a united group. In fact, clashes have been the most felt between *siloviki* members themselves than between distinct elite clans. For example, Viktor Zolotov, the Director of the National Guard of Russia and member of the *siloviki*, is the direct counterweight to the FSB and its former chief Nikolai Patruchev. Close to Vladimir Putin thanks to his position as bodyguard, he is trying to transform the National Guard into an institution of political importance (Stanovaya, 2018). What unites the *siloviki* are, in fact, a set of core values and joint policy preferences: the *siloviki* believe that the state is the basis of society and thus favour an enhancement of state power in all spheres of society – especially in the economic, security and defence sectors. In terms of ideology, the *siloviki* follow a “national project”, associating patriotism, anti-Westernism, xenophobia, nationalism, militarism, orthodoxy, authoritarianism and economic dirigisme (Staun, 2007).

The most concerning aspect about the *siloviki* is that they are trying to install their heirs all over the country. In order to have the smoothest transition possible, the *siloviki* are putting their own children in executive positions to ensure them a favourable future in the post-Putin era, starting with Vladimir Putin himself, who has ensured his daughters with a safe position in this coming era (Grey et al., 2015). This generation of heirs is commonly called the “New Generation” or the “Golden Children”. The *siloviki* have transferred their wealth – acquired mainly through corruption – to their children, who have become real cronies themselves. Among them, we have Boris Kovalchuk who is the CEO of the management board of state electricity firm InterRAO, son of Yury Kovalchuk, Vladimir Putin's banker as stated earlier. Gleb Frank, son-in-law of the business billionaire Gennady Timchenko, joined the board of directors of Stroitransgaz, a large construction company co-owned by Gennady Timchenko. Igor Rotenberg, son of Arkady Rotenberg, has acquired assets from his father, who is a business billionaire thanks to Vladimir Putin. Yury Shamalov, brother of Kirill and elder son of Nikolai Shamalov, has become deputy chairman of Gazprombank and owner of a pro-Kremlin media group. Finally, Sergei Ivanov, son of the Kremlin Chief of Staff Sergei B. Ivanov, is the director of Gazprombank (Grey et al., 2015).

Conclusively, it appears that the well-established putinist system is not likely to disappear after Vladimir Putin would have stepped down (Åslund et al., 2017). Aleksey Navalny perfectly resumes the current reality in the following statement:

Today in Russia, it is absolutely normal that the boards of directors at state banks are headed by children of security service officials, who aren't even 30 years old when they are appointed. It is more than just a dynastic succession. Children do not just inherit their parents' posts, but also the right to choose any other post they fancy. The danger

is that very soon all key resources will end up in the hands of five to seven families (Grey et al., 2015).

Aside the next generation of *siloviki*, Vladimir Putin is appointing increasingly more governors and civil servants aging between thirty and fifty years old, as part of his transition toward a younger elite. Nowadays, half of Russia's civil servants are aged lower than forty years old. This new elite will only have childhood memories of the Soviet Union, instead of traumatic memories as the current older elite does (Liik, 2019). Generation matters in this transition, because history matters. As a consequence, the regime will have to revise its discourse because the impact of the current historic narrative on public opinion will decrease as time passes.

The political elite: the liberal-technocrats

The *siloviki* can also be seen as Vladimir Putin's "old friends", in contrary to the third groups who are the liberal-technocrats or commonly called the *siliviki* in Russia – who are politically opposed to the *siloviki* (Staun, 2007). Over time, it has become more useful for Vladimir Putin to work together with younger technocrats who are modifiable to attain political goals (Tefft, 2020). These actors earned Vladimir Putin's personal trust through professionalism and their work within the government. The clan includes Dmitry Medvedev, Aleksey Kudrin, former Minister of Finance, Herman Gref, CEO and chairman of the executive board of Sberbank, Russia's largest bank, and Dmitry Kozak, former Deputy Prime Minister of Russia. These figures kept their influence regardless their position. However, their power is diminishing compared to when Dmitri Medvedev was president. Politically, they are in direct opposition with the *siloviki*, who consider them too "liberal". Liberal should in this context be understood as more liberal than the *siloviki*. However, they do agree that Russia should be governed vertically, with a strong and centralised executive (Staun, 2007).

The political elite: the Russian oligarchs

After having enumerated the most important clans of the Russian elite, one should notice that one group has been left over: the so-called Russian oligarchs. We can divide this group into two subgroups: the "survivors" and the "exilers" (Gorenburg, 2020). Indeed, when Vladimir Putin arrived to power, he curbed the power of Boris Yeltsin's business leaders and regional bosses by giving them the "choice" to stand behind him and to keep an important position or to purge them by seizing all their economic and political assets and to be sued in justice, like it was the case of Mikhail Khodorkovsky (Tefft, 2020). In 1999, the *siloviki* who had Vladimir Putin's back, launched an attack on Boris Yeltsin's relatives and oligarchs, by leaking damaging evidence of corruption. After having installed "their man" at the highest level of power, the *siloviki* started to gather the country's wealth for themselves: they targeted one company after the other, one oligarch after the other (Beer, 2020). Consequently, some went to exile, and some accommodated themselves to Vladimir Putin (Tefft, 2020). Those members can be characterised as "survivors" of the Yeltsin era and include people who have made their career mainly in the business world. Many of those oligarchs made fortune before Vladimir Putin's reign, and survived thanks to large monetary tributes to the Kremlin (Åslund et al., 2017). However, these oligarchs have witnessed a decline of their influence in recent years, in favour of bureaucratic officials. An example of Yeltsin survivor is Vagit Alekperov, the president of the Russian oil company LUKOIL (Gorenburg, 2020).

The ideological elite

From an ideological point of view, the Russian elite can be divided between liberals and the non-liberals or the “protectors” – the most ideologically tinted group of the Russian elite. This fraction consider itself as keeper of the values and ideology of the Russian state. Their ideology is based on conservative, constitutional and anti-Western values, and gain more and more influence in the official discourse of the Kremlin (Stanovaya, 2020). The most influential actor of this group is, without a doubt, the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), Patriarch Kirill.

Since the rise to power of Vladimir Putin, there has been an implicit deal between the ROC and the Kremlin, from which both parties benefit. The Kremlin uses a patriotic and state-centred historical narrative as a political instrument to achieve political goals, and in this effort, it is supported by the ROC and its Patriarch, who receives all the privileges – monetary or not – in return (Pomerantsev, 2014). The deal is thus simple: in return for political privilege, legal solutions, and financial support, the ROC accept to stay loyal to the Kremlin and to have its back in their discourse (Curanovic, 2012). As Aleksey Navalny stated during one of his trial: “The same people who used to be Komsomols², then became committed democrats and have now transformed into patriots—and we’re meant to believe them?” (Pomerantsev, 2014). He explains with irony that the kind of discourse used by the Kremlin will be coherent with the political aims that have to be achieved. During the 2011-2012 demonstrations, the Kremlin perfectly understood that corruption and economic stagnation were the grievances of the population. Consequently, it shifted its discourse towards a conservative and hegemonic discourse focussing on the protection of Russian identity and ideology in a kind of “clash of civilisation” with the West. In this discourse, religion became important, hence the importance of the relationship between Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill (Torbakov, 2014).

Consequently, the ROC and its Patriarch in the post-Putin era will play an important role, because sections of the elite have become persuaded that a modern civil society has to be consolidated by identity. It has gone so far that Russia’s national security and foreign policy during the Putin presidency have focused on this need of “spiritual security and sovereignty”. We thus witness in current Russia a true alliance between the Russian elite and the ideological elite, who aim to achieve the same goals (Hudson, 2015). This alliance has even become institutional: the ROC has devoted a lot of efforts in its interaction with key state institutions, creating in this way a network of influence within the deep state. The ROC is systematically consulted by political parties, representatives of the Church are invited in state ceremonies, sacred places are renovated with the money of state-owned companies, and so on. This has allowed the ROC to take the lead and to disseminate its values among the elite who compose these bodies (Hudson, 2015). The two worlds – religious and political – are highly intertwined in today’s Russian Federation and their mutual support is not likely to disappear, when the “miracle of God” – the name that Patriarch Kirill has given to Vladimir Putin in 2012– will step down.

However, the rise of the protectors and their ideological domination is a matter of concern to the other influential groups (Stanovaya, 2020). In fact, as was explained hereabove, the “liberal technocrats” and the “protectors” can end up in an ideological fight as soon as Vladimir Putin steps

² The Komsomol was a political youth movement during Soviet times.

aside. A clash is thus occurring in Russia today between the “liberals” – represented by the young technocrats – and the “anti-liberals” represented by the protectors, being most often also members of the *siloviki*. Russian elites are becoming more and more polarised when it comes to political beliefs, creating a rather unclear ideological spectrum (Ponarin & Sokolov, 2013). While economic liberals are still an important group in Russia, the number of political liberals are diminishing, turning in favour of the more authoritarian belief system shared by the *siloviki*. In fact, it is the predominance of liberal capitalist economic policies, that makes it possible for the liberal fraction to survive (Ponarin & Sokolov, 2013), but this fraction is reinforced by the population, who is asking for more political liberalisation and democratisation. The position of the elite towards these expressions of demands will be from major importance for the future Russian political picture.

4. PERSPECTIVE ON THE POST-PUTIN ERA

Since the constitutional referendum held in July 2020, experts agree to confirm the beginning of a new era in Russia. Indeed, the following years are expected to prepare Russia for the post-Putin era, regardless of how long Vladimir Putin is planning to stay in power. The Russian president is currently proceeding to a systemic transformation of his regime and seems to have several objectives: to perpetuate Putinism and its values, to solve the problem of 2024, and to legitimise the power of the president, which has been weakened after twenty years in power. However, regarding the current events and mass demonstrations of January 2021, this last issue is unlikely to be solved in the near future (Barluet, 2020).

The Constitutional changes

The first concrete step that opened the reflexion on the post-Putin era was the revision of the Constitution and the resign of the Medvedev government, whose ministers, by the way, have known about the dissolution at the very last minute (Belton, 2020). After ruling Russia for 21 years, making of him the second longest-serving leader after Joseph Stalin, Vladimir Putin has finally given a sign that he is reflecting on the aftermath (Meyer et al., 2020). The Russians gave their “agreement” to the constitutional changes through a referendum³ on July 1, originally planned in April but postponed due to the pandemic. It is important to understand that the vote is mainly an attempt to obtain the thrust of its people as an instrument of legitimacy in front of the elites, who begin to dissociate themselves and become autonomous from the power in place. Indeed, in the early 2000s, the *siloviki* accumulated wealth in Vladimir Putin’s name, but this has led to the fact that they are now able to operate in their own name (Stanovaya, 2020).

The referendum concerned some major constitutional amendments. Regarding our topic, the relevant amendments are the amendment regarding the presidential position: it restricts the number of presidential terms to a maximum of two terms in office for a lifetime – he has served four – but annuls the previous term of the presidency prior to these amendments⁴ (Roth, 2020). This amendment

³ Note that the referendum had no direct effect: even if the vote was negative, the Russian regime had the legitimacy to approve the amendments.

⁴ In other words, “presidential terms held at or prior to the entry into force of this amendment of two consecutive will not count towards the total” (Russell, 2020).

allows Vladimir Putin to accomplish a double objective: to extend his presidency for two more terms – for twelve more years until 2036 – and to restrict the power of the president at the same time (Gould-Davies, 2020). According to Alexey Makarkin of the Center for Political Technologies, a Moscow-based thinktank,

Putin’s constitutional amendments were an attempt to plan for his transition in 2024 and to reduce the focus on whom he would select as a successor by making that role less important. The president will not be as dominating a figure [as Putin]. So, the naming of his successor won’t be such a crucial decision (Roth, 2020).

Secondly, one of the amendments aims to reinforce the power of the Parliament and the role of Prime Minister. Third, the new draft of the Constitution provides immunity to former presidents and their families and former president will become members of the Federation Council for life (Russell, 2020). The effort to consolidate his immunity through a constitutional revision, could be perceived as a sign that Vladimir Putin is planning to leave office (Meyer et al., 2020)⁵.

In fact, the revision of the Constitution can be understood as a way to convince the Russian population that it is necessary for Vladimir Putin to stay in power in order to be able to organise the new regime that will come after him. Vladimir Putin himself acknowledged in front of the Duma that the amendments are justified by the need of stability inside and outside Russia which are, according to him, only reachable through a prolonged presidency (Russell, 2020). The problem is that the president, elite and population have a different interpretation on the legitimacy of the coming mandate (Stanovaya, 2020).

The scenarios

Russian history has taught Russian leaders that a succession can bring instability to the country (Tefft, 2020). The aim of Vladimir Putin is thus to organise the transition in such a way that everything will be decided beforehand. Keeping Russia stable, avoiding political surprises and erasing any possibility of colour revolutions at home and abroad are key goals of putinism. Through the constitutional modifications, he gave himself the possibility to take more time to deal with one of those key goals: the management of the elite. The Russian elite is a key critical factor of this transition, if not the most important one. Therefore, Vladimir Putin adopts the doctrine of *diviser pour mieux régner* and aims to answer the question of elite fighting before his departure. However, by giving more power to the elite, Vladimir Putin is putting his own system at risk: does he still have total control over his elite? While he incontestably did a few years ago, the answer is not so clear anymore. The Navalny case raises questions about this state of affairs: what if the poisoning of Aleksey Navalny did not come from an order of Vladimir Putin but from another figure of the ruling elite? This puts the whole system into question. And the Navalny case is not isolated: how can we be sure that it is Vladimir Putin that ordered the murder of Sergei Skripal and his daughter with Novichok? What exactly did Vladimir Putin know about the hacking of 2016 US election campaign? The answer to these questions is at the stage

⁵ Note that the constitutional amendments also include a clause that states that the president “must have lived in Russia for 25 years and cannot have held a foreign passport or residency permit”. This clause excludes Alexei Navalny, who studied at Yale in 2010 (Luhn, 2020).

of mere guesswork (Sestanovich, 2020). Political scientists, in the coming years, will have to pay attention to a possible change in balance of power between the president and the ruling elite.

Several scenarios are on the table regarding Vladimir Putin's succession. A first plausible scenario would be that Vladimir Putin would step aside but would keep an important status of "father of the nation", like the former president Nursultan Nazarbayev did in Kazakhstan (Volkov & Kolesnikov, 2020). Gleb Pavlovsky, a former Kremlin adviser and political scientist at Bloomberg claims that "Putin already has several times thought about leaving office, though remaining a player in the game. This thought has been in his head for some time and it doesn't appear to be connected to any illness.", when reflecting on whether Vladimir Putin has become too old to rule (Meyer et al., 2020). Here is where the second amendment on the reinforcement of the Parliament becomes important, because if Vladimir Putin occupies the position of prime minister or President of the State Council, his power will be nearly the same as the power of the President of the Russian Federation. This option would allow him to keep control over institutions (de Glinasty, 2020), without the daily burden of the presidency (Meyer et al., 2020). Some analysts believe that this is the most credible scenario: Vladimir Putin would abandon the status of president but remain Russia's dominant political figure in a role as Russia's prime minister or President of the State Council (Roth, 2020), an advisory board that will determine the lines of domestic, foreign and socio-economic policy (Luhn, 2020). The new amendments granting him lifelong immunity and a seat at the State Council would be a convenient way out, for the president who has undertaken his 21st year at the head of the country (Russell, 2020).

Vladimir Putin could, consequently, directly choose for a strong leader coming from the security service or the military, to be sure that putinism lives on (Volkov & Kolesnikov, 2020). This scenario would benefit for Vladimir Putin himself, since his immunity will best be ensured by putting loyalists at key positions. Vladimir Putin is thus in search for a person who is strong enough to keep tight control of Russia, but loyal enough to ensure its security and immunity and those of his allies (Luhn, 2020). If Vladimir Putin dies tomorrow, the Constitution indicates that it is the current Prime Minister of Russia Mikhail Mishustin, a well-respected but little-known head of the tax service, who would become the acting president of the Russian Federation. Of course, an election would follow in the 90 days, but Mikhail Mishustin would have had the time to contact his *siloviki* friends in order to ensure his re-election (Sestanovich, 2020). However, Mikhail Mishustin is not the only potential candidate. While reforming his government, Vladimir Putin has also appointed deputy prime ministers, who are closely linked to the Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin, a beloved politician for his ruling of Moscow and member of the *siloviki*. This reshuffle means that Sergei Sobyanin is also a potential candidate for the presidency. It is thus much likely that Vladimir Putin has some names on his mind, but does not speak out to avoid any infighting within the elite (Luhn, 2020).

The transition phase must thus be understood as a fight between the different fractions, who are striving to claim key positions for themselves in order to secure their future, once Vladimir Putin would have stepped down, whenever the exact date (Stanovaya, 2019). The impact of the elite thus does not stop at the election of the new president but will have influence on whether the new president gets these fractions to do what he wants or whether they get him to do what they want (Sestanovich, 2020). As we understand, one of the complexities is that there is no frontrunner among the *siloviki* but is a pluralist group. If the potential candidate like Mikhail Mishustin does not gain trust among the *siloviki*, the competition between the various clans comprised of the *siloviki*, the oligarchs, the St. Petersburg clique and the survivors of the Boris Yeltsin' era would likely be fierce and chaotic

(2020). Vladimir Putin expressed his fear in an interview with state-owned television channel Rossiya (Belton, 2020):

Unless the clock was reset on presidential terms in this vote [referendum], in a couple of years, as I know from experience, instead of a normal work routine, people at many levels of authority will start looking around in search of possible successors (Belton, 2020).

According to Sergei Pugachev, a former member of Vladimir Putin's inner circle in exile, the question of the succession has always been a struggling issue for the president (Belton, 2020).

For Putin, the succession was always a serious, personal stress. He never intended to hand over control of the country to anyone. Putin saw himself running Russia behind the scenes as the father of the nation, but finding a successor who would go along with this plan was always a big problem. Putin can't stand outsiders. It's either his people or no one. It could be his driver or his bodyguard. The successor has to be his (Belton, 2020).

Another scenario would be to appoint an "acting president" – or to play "another musical chair" if we use Mikhail Khodorkovsky words – (Khodorkovsky & Graham, 2019), until his return as he did in 2008 with Dmitry Medvedev (Gozman, 2018). The aim is to replace Vladimir Putin with someone who is currently not so predominant in the public debate. Here is where the young technocrats become important. They are intimately linked with the *siloviki*, since they are appointed by them, but they are low profile officials who hold important managerial positions of the state. These people could instrumentalise the power, while the true leaders are behind them (Volkov & Kolesnikov, 2020). The time of tandemocracy between Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin embodied this case scenario, when Vladimir Putin wanted a successor only in name, who was ready to let him lead the country from behind (Belton, 2020). However, the consequences were not so beneficial: during his presidency Dmitry Medvedev has flirted with liberalist ideas and with Westerns powers (Stanovaya, 2019), obliging Vladimir Putin to harden Russia's position at his return (Sestanovich, 2020).

The most incredible scenario would be fair elections, but this would be out of character for Vladimir Putin, and even of Russia (Gozman, 2018). The Western world should understand that the electoral tradition will not evolve to fair elections so easily in a country which has not known fair elections for years. What will happen in Russia after 2024 remains the most important political question in the country, however, at this point, it is unclear which scenario awaits Russia.

5. MASS DEMONSTRATIONS IN THE POST-PUTIN ERA

As we have seen during the January 2021 demonstrations, the Russian society is becoming more concerned about domestic issues and ready to fight even under repression (Ponarin & Sokolov, 2013). The most worrisome grievance among the population are the declining living standards, the stagnation of the economy and the corruption of the elite. As Mikhail Khodorkovsky perfectly explains during a meeting at the Council of Foreign Relations, Vladimir Putin has become an autocrat and is following a program going from a democratic to an autocratic regime. The Russian society, on the other hand, is taking the step from a more traditional regime to democratic consciousness (Khodorkovsky & Graham, 2019). Here is where the friction appears between state and public opinion

in Russia. The nationwide discontent is still a minority, but this minority is constantly growing. In January 2021, thousands took the streets to protest against the imprisonment of Aleksey Navalny, the main oppositional leader, and against the corrupted elite. As Tatiana Kastouév-Jean, director for the Centre on Russia at IFRI, explained, one of the peculiarities of this year demonstrations is that they are nationwide, especially in the regions. Moreover, these demonstrations do not concern only the younger generation anymore. 40% of the protesters are new protesters who have never demonstrated before (Roux et al., 2021). It is important to note that not all the demonstrators are taking the streets to support Aleksey Navalny and to demand his liberation from jail. The eager of the Russian population mainly comes from the video posted by Aleksey Navalny, which confronts the population with reality: their decreasing living standards and purchasing power vs the unbelievable wealth of their president and his elites (Roux et al., 2021). Vladimir Putin has repeatedly denied any responsibility in the enrichment of his associates, and he has rejected all assertions by political opponents like Aleksey Navalny that himself is a beneficiary of the wealth of state-owned companies (Kramer, 2017).

On the other side, the authorities are opting for some harsh decisions to tame the protests. First of all, the Russian government does not give importance to the words of Aleksey Navalny and systematically avoid to use his name during speeches (Roux et al., 2021). This has become more and more difficult to accomplish, regarding the current events. What is easier to put in place are the continuous bans of permits for protests and the use of law enforcement instruments (Greene, 2019). One of the features of this new policy is to strengthen the use of force and to manipulate the justice system in order to terrorise the overall population: blood and prison can have an effect of solidarity for the fiercest opposition members but can have the opposite effect on the overall population (Greene, 2019). As Aleksey Navalny himself expressed during his process at the Moscow City Center on February 2nd, 2021: "The main reason this is happening is to intimidate a huge number of people" (2021). Through this quote, he wants to make clear that by imprisoning him, Vladimir Putin aims to terrorise the country and to force the protesters to step back. September 2021 is the next date in line for the population to express popular discontent, during the Duma elections. Aleksey Navalny has called for his supporters to opt for a "smart voting", which consists in voting for anyone but the representative of United Russia. Moreover, the fact that protesters were high in numbers during the January 2021 demonstrations will make it harder for the regime to justify its "large victory" during the Duma elections. The protesters are the prove that not such a wide majority of Russians are supporting the current regime (Roux et al., 2021). Mikhail Khodorkovsky in his interview also noted that the Duma elections have to be followed closely, because, according to him, Vladimir Putin's structural power is falling apart at the seeds, and a weaker support for the president, means a weaker president and means a weaker interest for the presidential power by the different elite fractions (Khodorkovsky & Graham, 2019), an element that is crucial in the transitional period that we will witness in the coming years.

The question raised here is to know how the ruling elite is behaving towards this unrest and how it will react to it in the future. Are the elite fractions going to respond to demands of the populations or are they standing behind Vladimir Putin? As a matter of fact, it has become even more urgent to have this reflection on the influence of the Russian elite on the decision-making process since the so-called "Bolotnaya" demonstrations of 2011 and 2012, when Vladimir Putin came back to power (Greene, 2019). Indeed, some political scientists consider that these demonstrations are a

direct consequence of the tandemocracy years under Dmitri Medvedev rule, because those years fragmented the elite (Viktorov, 2014). The elite is generally seen as illegitimate by the Russians, and they thus rely on Vladimir Putin to manage the public management in order to keep the system stable. However, over the last years, this public management has been based on Vladimir Putin's popularity, which has decreased steadily. The elite's confidence towards the Putin regime can as a consequence also decrease, which is a major threat to Vladimir Putin's power (Greene, 2019). Some experts believe in a growing disloyalty coming from the elite towards Moscow. In this logic, we can perceive this popular awakening of the masses – and by domino effect of the elite – as a sign of the end of the Putin era (Bershidsky, 2019).

However, other experts claim that the social protests that Russians are witnessing today will be unsuccessful without a more pronounced support of the ruling elite. The elite is part of the establishment, ranging from the business world to the military, and are too invested to rebel against the Kremlin (Bershidsky, 2019). As a matter of fact, a revolution with huge masses storming towards the Kremlin will not lead to a significant change of Russia's political system, unless it is backed by the most powerful people of the country. The structure will not collapse because it is a hierarchical structure with different interest at each level, popular discontent being the very bottom of the pyramid (Viktorov, 2014). In other words, the scenario in which the ruling elite would support the protesters is seemingly unlikely to happen. However, the protesters – and especially the youth – are well aware of this reality and are not naïve (Foy, 2020). The following quote of a young Siberian protester perfectly resumes the duality to which the protesters are confronted:

This is reality: we are the Putin generation. I completely understand that he has shaped me as a person, even though that is not something I like to acknowledge. It is a fact. But there are so many things wrong about this country that are about the people at the top, in the hierarchy who control things [referring to corruption, oligarchs and vested interests]. They will be there even when Putin leaves. That's the problem: there is a system. The youngsters now are more fearless and more principled. People that are going to the streets know that they could be arrested but they still do. This young generation, they literally have nothing to lose (Foy, 2020).

Important to note in this context, is the uncoherent and incohesive response of the elite towards the oppositional leader Aleksey Navalny. For quite some time, it was commonly accepted that the Russian elite embodied a monolith leadership, but it is not. The reaction of the elite to the Navalny case is a perfect example (Stanovaya, 2021). The Russian elite do not agree on whether he should participate in elections, on whether he should go to prison, on the type of repression to protesters, and so on, and this disagreement is growing steadily (Stanovaya, 2018). The main aim of Aleksey Navalny's latest action was to mobilise the Russian population and to show the true face of the Russian regime, but consequently, he also managed to sow discord within the elite. Viktor Zolotov, head of the National Guard, once stated: "No one has ever hit you back, Mr. Navalny". A direct attack to his opponent, the FSB, who is supposed to oversee domestic politics and take care of the case Navalny. This quote signifies that Aleksey Navalny has become an instrument of elite fighting, making the response to his actions less effective. (Stanovaya, 2018).

It is thus unlikely that Russia will face a true revolution as it has known in history. However, Vladimir Putin faces a dilemma that every autocrat who spend too much time in office faces at some point: violence becomes both the solution to the regime's survival but also contains the germs of its

downfall (Stanovaya, 2019). The moral contract that Vladimir Putin holds with his population since the beginning of his presidency has changed over time. In 2000, the deal was to support Vladimir Putin in return for the recovery of the economy and better living standards. However, since 2014 and the Crimean crisis, the purchasing power of the Russians has diminished unprecedently since the beginning of the Putin era (de Gliniasty, 2020). Demonstrations are thus likely to continue, as well as the consequent repression.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can state that geopolitical and economic problems are not as fundamental as political change in Russia (Avadliani, 2019). The domestic demonstrations, the questioning of democracy, the social struggles and the elite fractions are making the deep state fragile (Sestanovich, 2020). Political analysts will have to focus on internal developments of the Russian Federation, since the succession of Vladimir Putin will have a huge impact on domestic issues, which will overflow also on key sectors as the economy and foreign policy.

In this paper, I tried to deconstruct the rather obscure Russian regime and to name the men who are at power in the Russian Federation. Further, we have discussed the transitional period that is currently occurring in Russia and to what extent this ruling elite will play a role in the post-Putin era. The highest level of power is still occupied by the people who have been the closest to Vladimir Putin since day one. An elite continuum and stability are still present in Russia, but the shift from the appearance of eternal stability to collapse is also on the horizon, the recent demonstrations being the materialisation of those years of elite enrichment and popular impoverishment (Gorenburg, 2020). We can conclude that we witness in Russia a social, as well as a political turning point (de Gliniasty, 2020). The post-Putin era thus has some surprises in store and will have to be followed closely.

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