

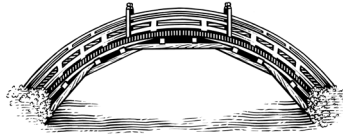
BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE

Brian D. Taylor

The Code of Putinism

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Mark N. Katz

Peter Rutland

Robert Orttung and Ellen Powell

Brian D. Taylor

Where Is Putinism Leading Russia?

Mark N. Katz

Brian Taylor's *The Code of Putinism* is an insightful book that examines the motivations of Vladimir Putin and his associates, describes the means by which they have ruled, assesses how successfully Putinism has been in both the domestic and the foreign policy realms, and analyzes the sustainability of Putinism. Unlike Marxism-Leninism, which was an explicit ideology, Taylor describes Putinism as a mentality, or code, consisting of not just ideas (such as great-power statism, anti-Westernism and anti-Americanism, and conservatism or anti-liberalism) but also habits (such as control, order, unity or anti-pluralism, loyalty, and hypermasculinity) and even emotions (including desiring respect but feeling humiliated by the West, resentment, and vulnerability or fear) (pp. 10–11, 20, 30, 35).

Taylor emphasizes that Putinism is a mentality held by both Putin himself and the ruling elites who support him. Putinism also has a broad following among the Russian public. Putin, though, is very much at the center of it all through his control of the formal mechanisms of government, the often competing informal clans and networks, and the petroleum- and mineral-extraction enterprises that provide the bulk of Russia's—and the elites'—income. The pursuit of Putinism, along with rising oil prices, helped Russia achieve impressive economic growth during Putin's first two terms in office (2000–2008), but it has since produced economic stagnation (p. 128). Even so, Russia has punched above its weight in the foreign policy realm (especially since Putin's return to the presidency in 2012), as shown by Moscow's successes in annexing Crimea in 2014, supporting secessionism in eastern Ukraine beginning in 2014, intervening in Syria since 2015, and contributing to domestic doubt and uncertainty in the United States through interference in the 2016 presidential elections (see chap. 6). The book argues that with economic growth increasingly difficult to obtain due to sanctions, lower oil prices, and corruption, Putin has become more and more reliant on the foreign policy realm to achieve the successes that Putinism needs to sustain public support and its own self-image. Putin may be preparing the ground for

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another such foreign policy “success” in Belarus. However, Taylor casts doubt on Moscow’s ability to continue punching above its weight in the face of likely continued economic stagnation, poor relations with the West, and a rising China.

Throughout the book, Taylor emphasizes that Putinism is not just how Putin himself thinks but also the mentality of the government, security service, and economic elites that support him. The question that arises, then, is whether Putinism will outlast Putin. The pervasiveness of the Putinist mindset within the ruling elite suggests that it will, but past experience with leadership changes in Tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet Russia suggests that it might not. This is because each new leader who has lasted for any significant period has reversed important aspects of the previous leader’s policies. Alexander III put a complete stop to the liberalization efforts pursued by Alexander II. Unlike Alexander III, Nicholas II allowed for some liberalization after 1905, although more out of necessity than choice. Lenin eliminated the tsarist elite and dramatically reoriented the basis of politics and economics in Russia. Stalin ended Lenin’s New Economic Policy. Khrushchev pulled back from and denounced Stalin’s use of terror. Brezhnev ended Khrushchev’s “reforms.” Gorbachev sought to reform Brezhnev’s “stagnation.” Yeltsin pursued more thoroughgoing reforms than did Gorbachev. Putin halted Yeltsin’s liberalization and pursued his own brand of authoritarian modernization.

Given this pattern, it would not be surprising if the leader who eventually replaces Putin dramatically alters Putin’s policies as well. (One of the ways we knew that Medvedev was not really supplanting Putin during his 2008–12 presidency was that he did not alter Putin’s policies much.) And just as a shared Marxist-Leninist ideology did not prevent policy changes from one leader to the next during the Soviet era, continuing to share a Putinist mentality might not prevent a successor from altering Putin’s policies either. Of course, Putin might not actually be replaced until his current term expires in 2024 or even later into the 2030s if he holds onto power through, for example, becoming head of a union integrating Russia with Belarus. By then, however, China’s power, as well as its demands on Russia, might have grown to such an extent that Putin’s successor simply cannot overlook it the way that Putin has.

The book argues persuasively that Putin regards the United States as a greater threat than China. He in fact does see the United States as “out to get him” through promoting color revolutions, economic collapse, and even secession (pp. 170–79). China, by contrast, is not doing any of these

things (pp. 192–93). From Putin’s viewpoint, it clearly makes sense to see the United States as more of a threat than China, despite the fact that China has a much larger population and economy than Russia and is becoming increasingly powerful militarily. Putin, in fact, does not seem to treat China as a threat at all, which seems odd considering how suspicious he is generally. Why is this? Has Putin made an accurate assessment that, since China also regards the United States as its primary threat, Beijing is unlikely to threaten Russia? Or is his emotional anti-Americanism (which Taylor well describes) so strong that it has blinded him to the possibility of a threat from China? Or does Putin cynically calculate that by the time China poses an overt threat to Russia, it will also be a threat to the United States, and so Washington can be counted on to aid Moscow against China, despite all previous hostility, simply because it will be in the United States’ interest to do so? This is a subject that merits greater attention.

The most important question, though, is what will eventually become of Putinism. Taylor’s analysis suggests that this mentality is strong enough to maintain a hold on power in Russia due to its continued ability to suppress all internal opponents. At the same time, Putinism is not capable of carrying out the economic reforms needed to underwrite Russia’s great-power ambitions because such reforms would threaten the corrupt Putinist elite who benefit from the current system. If this is the case, then for all of its theatrics, Putinism seems destined to descend into Brezhnevism. Taylor’s elaboration of the emotional content of Putinism, however, suggests that Putin and his Putinist successor will see this state of affairs as resulting not from their own misguided policies but from U.S. and Western machinations instead. And they will respond accordingly. ◆

The Roots of Authoritarianism in Russia

Peter Rutland

In *The Code of Putinism*, Brian Taylor presents a balanced, informed portrait of Putin and the system of “Putinism.” The book covers an impressively broad sweep of relevant topics in Russian politics and society, from the state of the roads to the war in Syria.

Taylor rejects simplistic portrayals of Putin as a self-interested kleptocrat, noting that central to his world view—and his actions—is the restoration of Russia as a great power. Putin’s international ambition and domestic political “code” are two sides of the same coin: the former justifies and reinforces the latter. Putinism is a combination of what Taylor calls “hyperpresidentialism” and informal clan understandings. This “code” has proved effective in stabilizing the political system, reviving the economy, and restoring Russia’s great-power status, but Russia eventually will need to make the transition from a personalistic to a rule-based system because this has not been achieved on Putin’s watch.

The central question lurking behind Taylor’s account, to which there is no easy answer, is to what extent Putinism is tied to the person of Putin. Did Putin create the system, or did the system create Putin? How much freedom of maneuver does he really have—is he a personal dictator or merely a broker, resolving disputes between rival clans and bureaucracies? Taylor portrays Putin as a fixer at the center of a web of informal networks (p. 79), yet also argues that he is “the boss,” endorsing “the image of Putin as a powerful tsar, the ruler who can dismiss any other official at any time and to whom all other officials owe their position” (p. 104). By contrast, no less an authority than Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the exiled oligarch turned opposition activist, sees Putin as a weak leader, controlled by criminal groups.¹ As a result, his capacity to effect significant policy change has been stymied by bureaucratic inertia and popular protest.

One way of approaching this question is to ask about the origins of Putinism. The book basically starts the story in 2000 and does not probe the question of origins at length. Taylor briefly discusses Putinism’s relationship

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¹ “Is Putin a Puppet? Interview with Mikhail Khodorkovsky,” interview by Emily Maitlis, *Newsnight*, March 16, 2018, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EA8x_ozvtqo.

to the deep history of Russia's authoritarian political culture (pp. 13, 36). But he prefers to see Putinism as a modern phenomenon, the product of a new, post-Soviet Russian society. Taylor describes Russia in 2000 as a "frail but functional semidemocratic system" (p. 41), while conceding that "Yeltsin did much both for efforts to build a democratic Russia, and to create conditions that enabled the return of authoritarianism" (p. 44).

However, it can be argued that most of Putinism's core features predate the accession of Putin to the presidency in 2000. The code was created by the oligarchic elite that rose to power under Boris Yeltsin. Archie Brown likes to argue that nearly all the features of democracy in Russia (such as competitive elections, a free press, a sovereign parliament, and freedom of association) were introduced under Mikhail Gorbachev and not Boris Yeltsin.² The only innovation under Yeltsin was the direct election of regional leaders (which Putin abolished in 2004 and restored in 2012). Despite this, Yeltsin is typically hailed by Western observers as the founding father of Russian democracy.

Similarly, one can argue that most of the key features of Russian authoritarianism were introduced under Yeltsin in the 1990s. Crony capitalism, Kremlin-friendly television stations, rigged elections, bribery and clientelism, loyalty to one's inner circle, a politicized judiciary, and invasion (of Chechnya, in this case) were all practices central to the Yeltsin administration's consolidation of power. Taylor describes the 1996 election as "the most competitive" in Russia's post-1991 history (p. 45). This may well be true, but would Yeltsin have really allowed Zyuganov to win? Taylor believes that Putin's clan system is centralized, whereas Yeltsin's was fragmented, but he concedes that Henry Hale, an authority on the subject, sees both as "single pyramid" systems (p. 105, footnote 52).

Most of the key informal networks that undergird the Putin regime were formed during the "wild privatization" of the 1990s: that is, when most of the new class of oligarchs started their business careers. Since then, we have seen constant churning in the individual ranks of the elite—some people emigrating, some new people rising to the top, outbreaks of corporate raiding—but there is arguably more continuity than change. While Putin brought his own people into the Kremlin, with 39% of the top jobs held by denizens of St. Petersburg by 2011 (p. 96), he was filling out a system of rule that had emerged under Yeltsin. What did Putin add, apart from the

² Archie Brown, "The Real Yeltsin Legacy," *Guardian*, April 25, 2007 ~ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/apr/26/comment.russia>.

windfall of GDP growth due to a surge in global oil prices that enabled the rich to get richer and the state to provide a better safety net for the poor?

I would not disagree with Taylor that Russia is more authoritarian under Putin than Yeltsin. Putin's two main distinctive contributions to Russian authoritarianism have been a recentralization of power over the regions and a hypermasculine personality cult, disseminated through television and social media. While Putin has indeed taken the personality cult to new heights and lows (Yeltsin did not pose for photos bare-chested), Yeltsin also relied heavily on his own image as a strong, no-nonsense leader. Additionally, Putin has made some effort to construct mass organizations to widen the base of his authoritarian regime (such as the youth movement Nashi or the All-Russian People's Front), but this has not been very successful.

It is Putin's recentralization of the "power vertical" that is probably his most important authoritarian innovation. In the 1990s, Yeltsin introduced the election of regional leaders and signed bilateral treaties granting them considerable autonomy, including exemptions from federal laws and taxes. After becoming president in 2000, Putin moved swiftly to enforce federal laws on the regions and collect federal taxes. He also reversed much of the privatization of the oil industry, an important source of federal revenue (p. 115). However, Yeltsin's decentralization had not been introduced to promote pluralism and democracy. Rather, it was clientelism in action. Yeltsin recognized the power of regional leaders, and they in return supported him in his battles with the parliament and in constructing a super-presidential system. Most of those regional leaders were themselves autocrats on their home turf. It is precisely that kind of clientelism that is central to Putinism. Under Putin, like under Yeltsin, the national republics show their loyalty to Moscow by reporting higher-than-average votes for the national leader. Taylor concedes that, in practice, Putin has struggled to impose his policy choices on Russia's regional elites: he observes that, by 2015, the power vertical "was more a myth than a reality" (p. 136).

On the national security front (chap. 6), Putin has pursued a more aggressive policy, including deploying troops in Georgia and Ukraine and assassinating political adversaries overseas. But Yeltsin also fulminated against NATO expansion and approved Prime Minister Evgeny Primakov's decision to turn around his plane en route to the United States when NATO started bombing Serbia in June 1999. So even in foreign policy, there is a great deal of continuity between the Yeltsin and Putin eras—it was just that Yeltsin's Russia lacked the means to follow up its words with deeds.

Putin claims the mantle of the true patriot (he once said “I am the biggest nationalist”), but in fact it was Yeltsin who first played the nationalist card back in 1991, bravely forging a sovereign Russian state by leading a popular revolution and dismantling the Soviet Union.

Finally, of course, there is the question of whether Putinism will survive in its present form once Putin leaves the political stage, whether in 2024, when his second term as president expires, or later. One clear weakness of Putinism, as Taylor underlines, is the lack of a mechanism for rotating the national leader, or at least grooming a successor. But if Putinism is in fact more about the ruling elite than Putin himself, then the elite should quite easily be able to find a replacement for Putin when he steps down. We have seen fairly smooth leadership transitions in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, despite the fact that those were more personalistic dictatorships than Putin’s Russia (though it should also be noted that they are much smaller and less complex countries).

In the Louvre museum, there is a four-thousand-year-old stele with the world’s oldest law carved into it: Hammurabi’s code. Putin’s code is not like Hammurabi’s code. Putin’s code is flexible and self-serving, and it could not be written in stone. Moreover, the code is not even Putin’s; it is the product of a group, a ruling elite, rather than a single individual. ◆

A State without a Society

Robert Orttung and Ellen Powell

Brian Taylor's *The Code of Putinism* provides a great introduction to the reign of Vladimir Putin in contemporary Russia. Drawing on his deep and extensive knowledge of Russian politics, Taylor deftly explains why Russia is different from other authoritarian countries. In a time when analyses of Russian politics are typically informed by an author's own ideology, he helps the reader gain a more dispassionate understanding of why Russia's most important leaders do what they do. In stressing that ideas, habits, and emotions matter in the "code" of Putinism, the book provides a nuanced alternative to the more common view that Putin and his team are driven purely by power and pecuniary predilections. At its best, *The Code of Putinism* offers guidance on how Putinist Russia might behave under certain circumstances, just as Nathan Leites's *The Operational Code of the Politburo* did on the Soviet leadership in the 1950s.

The book seeks to construct a complete picture of Putinism without becoming a turgid political science text. Yet what this effort ultimately results in is the synthesis of a huge amount of literature without an overall argument. There is no Virgil to guide us through the circles of the Putinist inferno. While Taylor quotes many experts on Russia, he never explicitly shares his own perspective with us. Perhaps because the intended audience of the book remains nebulous—is it students, the interested public, or policymakers?—many discussions are only summarized without going into greater detail or indicating who is right and who is wrong. Although Taylor's efforts to be even-handed are admirable, we would have appreciated reading more of his insights.

The paradox laid out at the beginning of the book—that "Putin seems to grow ever stronger, his famous muscles bulging powerfully, while Russian institutions remain weak and ineffective" (p. 1)—does not seem to be much of a paradox. This line of thinking made sense in Taylor's earlier books about Russia's security and military organs, in which the agencies

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grew stronger and the state as a whole grew weaker, but it does not transfer naturally to the concept of Putinism as a whole. The Russian state certainly is weak, which is a point deserves more explanation. The only explanation the book provides is that the code of Putinism leads the Russian president to think that he is more effective than any institutions can be, resulting in a lot of “disappointing outcomes and missed opportunities” (p. 132).

Perhaps the main missing ingredient in this top-down, elite-centric analysis is a discussion of Russian society. The book does a great job of explaining why Putin behaves in certain ways, but it does not attempt to explain why the rest of Russian society—140 million people—accepts these actions. It is understandable that Putin would want to bring Russia’s governors to heel after they grew more powerful during the 1990s, but why did they let him do that? Analysts at the time assumed that the governors would not be willing to surrender their newfound authority without a fight. That, however, is exactly what they did. Illuminating the interaction between state and society might deepen our understanding of precisely how the Russian state operates.

As it is presented here, Putin’s state seems to be floating, disengaged from the rest of Russia. It is not connected in any coherent way to the regions or society as a whole. It appears to act with impunity on an inert and shapeless population. However, Putin’s own policies have certainly led to societal change and the development of a much more assertive set of social groups. As his tenure drags on, regional, ethnic, generational, class, gender, and other cleavages are becoming more pronounced and forcing the state to respond. With Putin’s ideas, habits, and emotions leading him to behave one way, how does he always manage to respond to these demands in a manner that ensures that he remains on top? Understanding his effectiveness in this regard might further reveal how the current Kremlin elites retain control.


The book also does not explain where change might come from in Russia. The final section, “Exit from Putinism,” only summarizes various perspectives and suggests that neither a palace coup nor a revolution is likely. Of course, Taylor does not need to explain when Putin will leave office and under what conditions. However, it would have been helpful to discuss what signs might suggest that social unrest, always present in Russia, is becoming unmanageable or that the elites are no longer willing to support Putin.

Taylor does describe some changes, such as the evolution in loyalty relations (p. 103). Up until 2015–16, Putin had stuck with many of the same people, and there was little government turnover, except in unusual cases. More recently, he seems willing to push away some of his long-serving

cronies and replace them with subordinates; personal loyalty to Putin, Taylor writes, is replacing loyalty to the team as a whole (p. 93). This change seems important to understanding the evolution, and perhaps eventual devolution, of the Putinist system, and readers would have benefited from greater discussion.

Beyond the absence of discussion on society and change, we had a few small quibbles with the book. The text highlights some key contradictions, such as the fact that Putin's great-power aspirations run up against his obsessive need for social control. But it does not explain how these different agendas will be resolved. Nor does the book explain why Putin favors control over economic development. Strong economic performance would most likely make Putin genuinely popular. Why, then, does Putin not use his immense power to implement some of the changes his old friend Alexei Kudrin, the economic reformer, advocates? Further exploring such counterfactuals would have provided a better sense of what Russia could be were Putin to remain in power but balance the contradictions of the code in different ways.

As a final note, there are some implicit comparisons of Putin with Donald Trump throughout the text. St. Petersburg in the early 1990s educated Putin in the "art of the deal" rather than the practices of democracy (p. 87). As a foreign policy grandmaster operating on the international stage, Taylor describes Putin as #WINNING! (p. 166). None of us can escape thinking of Putin and Trump and wondering about the true nature of their ties. But it would be interesting to read a more explicit comparison of their ideas, habits, and emotions. Taylor's methodology might provide interesting insights about the U.S. president and could help more clearly reveal the nature of his rule as well.

Overall, *The Code of Putinism*, with its exploration of both the rational and the psychological, is a valuable primer on Putin and what makes him tick. It is well worth reading both for students who are just setting out on their journey into Russian studies and for policymakers in search of a nuanced take on Russia's president. While this book is a step forward, a definitive analysis of Putin will require a stronger argument, a more substantive exploration of state-society interactions, and a deeper engagement with the paradoxes within the code. 

Author's Response: The Code Is Central, but for How Long?

Brian D. Taylor

I very much appreciate the generous and thought-provoking reviews by Mark Katz, Robert Ortung and Ellen Powell, and Peter Rutland of *The Code of Putinism*. I cannot do justice to all of their observations, questions, and critiques, so I will concentrate on the following three issues: the extent to which Putinism is a departure from the system put in place by Vladimir Putin's predecessor Boris Yeltsin, Russia's relationship with China, and the future of Putinism.

First, however, I want to briefly reiterate my book's central claims, especially because Ortung and Powell contend that "an overall argument" is absent. The core of the argument is hiding in plain sight, right in the title: The "code of Putinism" is the collective mentality of Putin and his close associates. It is the set of ideas, habits, and emotions that guide key decisions in the realms of politics, economics, and foreign policy. Without comprehending this code, we cannot properly understand why nearly two decades of Putin's rule have resulted in a country that is both underperforming at home and overambitious abroad. Put simply, I set out to explain what Putin is up to. The overall argument is, for better or worse, very much focused on personality and leadership, and not on *longue durée* historical and structural forces, nor on social development and change.

Ortung and Powell agree with me that Putin's strong and personalistic rule has resulted in a weak and underperforming Russian state. They do not see this as much of a paradox, and I basically agree. Yet my argument challenges the widespread belief that Putin's dominance of Russian politics makes the state a pliable and potent tool in his hands. In the specialist community as well, it is sometimes argued that Putin has recreated a strong Russian state consistent with historical traditions.¹ As I demonstrate in chapter 5, "How Russia Is Misruled," in many spheres of state activity, and particularly in comparison with its peers, the Russian state is poorly governed. This is a direct consequence of the weakening of

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¹ See, for example, Gerald M. Easter, "The Russian State in the Time of Putin," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 24, no. 3 (2008): 199–230.

multiple formal institutions under Putin, who often prefers to rule in the mode of manual control.

The most direct challenge to at least part of my argument comes from Peter Rutland, who suggests that it is more accurate to say that the system created Putin, rather than the other way around. He rightly points out some important continuities between the Yeltsin and Putin eras, including clientelism and crony capitalism. Overall, though, the discontinuities seem more significant than the continuities, regardless of whether we are talking about the formal political system, informal clan relations, the relationship between big business and the state, or foreign policy. Let me provide a few examples.

Although Rutland agrees that Putin's Russia is more authoritarian than Yeltsin's, he declares that "most of the key features of Russian authoritarianism were introduced under Yeltsin," and wonders, "What did Putin add?" But to note, as Rutland does, that there were rigged elections under Yeltsin overlooks the much more important difference that national elections in the 1990s had uncertain outcomes; it was only under Putin that a national pattern of electoral fraud took hold, as the most detailed academic study of Russian electoral fraud shows.² Since the early 2000s, there has never been any doubt about the ultimate winner in presidential and parliamentary elections. Opposition parties controlled a majority of seats in parliament for most of Yeltsin's presidency; now United Russia dominates national and regional politics, and even the so-called opposition parties are generally reliable allies of the Kremlin. And to say that there were "Kremlin-friendly television stations" under Yeltsin is to downplay just how greatly Russian television has changed under Putin. The two main media oligarchs from the 1990s were dispossessed and driven from the country in very short order under Putin, with control of these stations—and all other major national TV channels—either returned to the state or entrusted to his close personal associates.

Changes from Yeltsin to Putin have been equally dramatic in other spheres. Most importantly, Russia has a different set of elites with a different outlook. If we look at such key positions in the polity as prime minister, head of the Security Council, director of the Federal Security Service, and head of the state Investigative Committee, those serving in these positions are all long-standing Putin associates from his hometown of St. Petersburg. We see

² Mikhail Myagkov, Peter C. Ordeshook, and Dimitri Shakin, *The Forensics of Election Fraud: Russia and Ukraine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 135–37, 272.

a similar pattern in the economy, with key state-controlled enterprises such as Gazprom (gas), Rosneft (oil), Transneft (pipelines), and Rostec (military industry) also headed by associates from either St. Petersburg or Dresden, where Putin served in the KGB. The same direct relationships to Putin are evident in key areas of the private sector. Nothing like this happened under Yeltsin. The priority of control and personal loyalty in major political and economic positions was not such an obsession.

Putin's conviction that the United States is out to get Russia, and is the source of all manner of undesirable episodes in and around Russia, is also very different from Yeltsin's outlook. After terrorists attacked a school in Beslan in southern Russia in 2004, Putin implied that the United States was helping them "cut from us a tasty piece of pie" because of Russia's nuclear weapons.³ When protests broke out in Moscow in December 2011 after fraudulent elections, he blamed a "signal" sent by U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton, who had raised concerns about the fairness of the elections. Similarly, protests in Kiev in 2013–14 that eventually led to the collapse of the Ukrainian government of Viktor Yanukovich—in what became known as the "Euromaidan revolution"—were blamed by Putin on the United States: "American employees of some laboratory...conducting experiments on rats."⁴ Accusations of doping by Russian athletes, press reports about secret bank accounts held by his friends—according to Putin, all of these can be traced back to U.S. government efforts to smear Russia and Putin personally.

Just as it is hard to imagine Yeltsin blaming a wide range of disconnected foreign and domestic events on U.S. meddling, it is equally hard to imagine him using military force to annex part of a neighboring country—the first such instance of military annexation in Europe since the end of World War II—because he blamed the United States for the protests that led to the collapse of that country's government. Similarly, selectively hacking and releasing documents in an effort to tip a U.S. presidential election, because he disliked one of the candidates, would have been unthinkable for Yeltsin. He wanted Russia to join the West, not weaken or disrupt it.

Putin's anti-Americanism brings us to a crucial issue highlighted by Katz: why is Putin also not worried about a potential threat from China?

³ "Obrashcheniye prezidenta Rossii Vladimira Putina" [Address by President Vladimir Putin], President of Russia website, September 4, 2004 ~ <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22589>.

⁴ "Vladimir Putin otvetil na voprosy zhurnalistov o situatsii na Ukraine" [Vladimir Putin Answered Journalists' Questions about the Situation in Ukraine], President of Russia website, March 14, 2014 ~ <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20366>.

After all, in terms of the size of the economy and population, two key drivers of national power, China is nine times as large as Russia, and they share a four-thousand-kilometer border. The answer can, once again, be found at least in part in Putin's mentality. Illiberal and statist China is an amenable partner for Russia, and the leaderships of both countries resent Western promotion of democracy and human rights. Indeed, as Elizabeth Economy recently observed in these pages, Chinese leaders believe that the United States "is attempting to undermine the party at home and contain China's rise abroad," a sentiment strikingly similar to the viewpoint of Russian rulers.⁵ In contrast with the West, Chinese leaders have been careful to show respect for Russia's great-power status, even while expanding China's influence into traditional spheres of Russian influence such as Central Asia. As I note in chapter 6, "China doesn't push Team Putin's emotional buttons" (p. 193).

The durability of this close relationship is a subject of intense speculation. Some American realists would like to enlist Russia as a counterweight to a rising China. Other observers see the emerging relationship as culturally and historically unlikely—can Russia really accept the role of junior partner in a Russia-China tandem? If my interpretation of Putinism is correct, we should expect this close relationship to continue as long as Putin is in charge.

This brings us to the last issue: the future of Putin and Putinism. All four reviewers want to know more about this. They are not alone. It is striking how much attention this question is already garnering among analysts of Russian politics, both in the country and abroad, less than a year after the beginning of Putin's fourth term as president, which runs until 2024. The reason, of course, is because who occupies the top job is of critical importance in a personalistic regime with weak institutional constraints. Rutland, who downplays Putin's individual importance and suggests that the "code" of the regime was created not by Putin but by pre-Putin elites, logically expects that "the elite should quite easily be able to find a replacement" and keep the system going without him.

Katz, in contrast, while accepting my point that the Putinist mentality is broadly shared by much of the ruling elite, suggests that major changes may be in store once a new leader comes to power. His rationale is that many past Russian and Soviet leaders departed dramatically from

⁵ Elizabeth C. Economy, "Author's Response: The Third Revolution Is Real," *Asia Policy* 13, no. 4 (2018): 64.

their predecessor's policies. He makes a pretty convincing case, and Russia watchers have often badly underestimated the prospects for change under a new leader. I also agree with Katz that, as long as Putin remains in power, further stagnation is the most likely trajectory. We have plenty of evidence by now that Putin will not embrace far-reaching institutional reforms that might stimulate higher economic investment and growth but also would potentially undermine his control and the interests of his close allies.

Orttung and Powell wonder whether social pressure might make the system unmanageable. As they note, and as I acknowledge in the introduction, *The Code of Putinism* is an elite-centric account, so Russian society remains largely in the background. There are several points worth emphasizing, however. First, to the extent that modernization theory—which posits a link between socioeconomic modernization and political democratization—gives us any insight into what might come after Putin, Russian society is highly educated, urbanized, and relatively wealthy in comparative perspective, although this wealth is unequally distributed. Second, and in contrast with the first point, much of this wealth is generated by natural resources, and many of these seemingly middle-class citizens work directly or indirectly for the state, which could blunt society's potential to be a democratizing force.⁶ Third, although personalist regimes historically have been threatened more from within than without, in recent decades mass mobilization has played a greater role in cases of autocratic collapse, and democratization is more likely (over 40% of the time) in such instances.⁷ As Putin is well aware, color revolutions have frequently swept away leaders in the post-Soviet space, most recently last year in Armenia.


None of this is meant to suggest that Putin is on his way out or that we can expect major change, including in a more liberal and open direction, anytime soon. The safest bet is that he will remain in power for some time, and that even after his departure, the system he built and the elite that surrounds him will persist.⁸ Safe bets are easy, and often correct. Yet there are growing signs of elite infighting and social discontent. According to the Russian constitution, Putin must step down as president in 2024, and lame ducks, particularly those facing declining popularity, are among the

⁶ Evgeny Gontmakher and Cameron Ross, "The Middle Class and Democratization in Russia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, no. 2 (2015): 269–84.

⁷ Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz, "How Autocracies Fall," *Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2014): 35–47.

⁸ For a comprehensive overview of what might come after Putin, see "Russia Beyond Putin," *Daedalus* 146, no. 2 (2017): 5–150.

most vulnerable of post-Soviet leaders.⁹ Putin, who values state power, order, unity, and loyalty, also seems to feel that the system remains highly vulnerable and thus is in need of personal and centralized control. His skill and adroitness at this task have surprised many, including me, who underestimated the seemingly gray apparatchik with KGB roots who rocketed to the top of Russian politics twenty years ago.

The Code of Putinism endeavors to explain the mentality of Putin and his team, but it is not a crystal ball and cannot predict what challenges will arise. Vladimir Putin does not like change or surprises. His current term as president, though, is shaping up to be his most difficult one yet, and I would guess that more surprises are in store for him in the coming years. 

⁹ Henry E. Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

