

რუსეთის მმართველი წრეები: აქტიური მოქმედებით მთვინეობა?

RUSSIAN RULING CIRCLES: AN ONLY APPARENT SOLIDITY?

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ჟურნალისტი და ყოფილი საზღვრის რეგიონის მკვლევარი

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უკრაინაში რუსეთის შეჭრის შემდეგ რუსეთის წინააღმდეგ უპრეცედენტო საერთაშორისო სანქციები დაწესდა. მიუხედავად ამისა, რუსეთის ფედერაციის პოლიტიკური ელიტა მნიშვნელოვან წევრებს არ მიუტოვებიათ. ბევრი მათგანი პუტინის ამ გადაწყვეტილებას ქვეყნის მომავლისთვის კატასტროფულ მოვლენად მიიჩნევს, მაგრამ ღიად არ გამოხატავს აზრს. ავტორი თვლის, რომ ყოველივე ეს პუტინის მიერ ორი ათწლეულის განმავლობაში შექმნილი ძლიერი პოლიტიკური სისტემის დამსახურებაა. მმართველთა 100 ყველაზე გავლენიანი წარმომადგენლიდან მხოლოდ ერთი, ანატოლი ჩუბაისი, განუდგა მას.

პუტინის სისტემა ძლევამოსილი ჩანს, რომელიც იმგვარადაა ჩამოყალიბებული და კონტროლირებადი, რომ არცერთ გავლენიან ჯგუფს მისი განადგურება არ შეუძლია. მიზეზი ორია: 1. სისტემა მის ყველა წევრს აძლევს სარგებლის მიღების უფლებას; 2. ე.წ. „სილოვიკების“ [ძალაღმძვინკების] როლი მნიშვნელოვანია არალოიალურობის პრევენციისთვის. კრემლს ჯერ კიდევ აქვს რესურსი იმისთვის, რომ რუსული მმართველი ელიტის წარმომადგენლებმა წასვლას დარჩენა ამჯობინონ.

ავტორი კითხულობს, რესურსების სიმწირისა და საერთაშორისო სანქციების ფონზე, როდემდე გაგრძელდება ასე? რესურსები ილევა, რამაც, შეიძლება, რუსულ ელიტაში კონკურენცია გაზარდოს და სისტემის მიტოვება გარდაუვალი აღმოჩნდეს.

მაგრამ ელიტის წევრები ამას, სავარაუდოდ, მხოლოდ მას შემდეგ გააკეთებენ, რაც ქვეყნის შიგნით ყველა შანსს გამოიყენებენ საკუთარი ინტერესების დასაცავად. რეჟის ჟანტეს აზრით, პრობლემურია პუტინის მემკვიდრის შერჩევაც. სისტემის ავტორიტარული ბუნება პუტინის სიცოცხლეშივე მის შეცვლას თითქმის წარმოუდგენელს ხდის.

The future of Europe, and for a part of the world, depends on whether or not the ruling circles of the Russian Federation will remain loyal to President Vladimir Putin. By deciding to start war against Ukraine, the Russian head of State has led his country down a very uncertain path and his regime to-

wards existential risks. In retaliation, what Moscow calls “the collective West” has decided to impose a series of sanctions on Russia of an unprecedented scale. One of the expected effects is to make them so intolerable to Russian ruling circles that they push them to try to convince or force Putin to give up his ambitions.

In Europe, some experts, diplomats and commentators are asserting since months that the sanctions have failed. These statements are certainly too hasty. Almost none of the specialists interested in the Russian elites are surprised that they did not give in to dissension. But everyone also knows that differences in interests and visions of the future and of Russia affect them. The question is all the more important since, as the political scientist Milan Svoblik has shown, authoritarian regimes in the second half of the 20th century collapsed as a result of intra-elite conflicts in 70% of cases (Svoblik 2012)

From the very first days of the war, credible reports appeared about the dissatisfaction of the elites with the decision to start the war, both among businessmen and in the ranks of the army and the security services. But the tour de force of Mr. Putin’s system is that despite their opposition to this war and the very bleak prospects it brings, the ruling circles remain loyal to Putin for the moment. Why such solidity of the Putin system? We will try to provide some answers to this question here, by proposing a mapping of the current Russian ruling circles.

1) A ruling elite shaped by Putin

Russia’s current ruling circles have been shaped by Vladimir Putin for 22 years. To the point that each of the members of these circles owes his place there only to the will of the president. A few months after coming to power on December 31, 1999, Mr. Putin began to bring them into line. From June 2000, he attacked the billionaires Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky, who would soon leave Russia. Svoblik 2012

These departures were followed in 2003 by the Mikhail Khodorkovsky affair, the inaugural act of Putinism in terms of the management of the ruling elites. The imprisonment of the oil tycoon and the dismantling of the Yukos group lay the foundations for the political and institutional consolidation of Mr. Putin’s system. It opens an era of interventionism presented as the return of the State, after that of the State capture by the oligarchs, but it was probably more about the capture of the country’s resources by those close to the new President.

→ A stable group

After taking control of the so-called elite (2000’s), then after consolidating it through the strengthening of the positions of the elder companions of the president (2010’s), the regime found itself in a “state of equilibrium”. We can confirm this state through the annual rankings produced in Russia to determine who the most influential figures in the country are. The methodology of their establishment is questionable, but they nevertheless allow to give an idea of who makes up the Russian elite. We will rely here on two rankings, in their 2021 edition (before the Ukrainian war): the “Top 100” of the main Russian politicians of the newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*¹ and the “power index” of the *Index-Davydov*². We then created our own “top 100”, which is a “Combined top 100” made of these two rankings that we will use below.

1 “100 vedushchikh politikov Rossii v 2020 godu” [Top 100 of the Russian politicians in 2020], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, January 2021. https://www.ng.ru/ideas/2021-01-11/7_8053_100.html. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* is asking to 29 experts to note the “influence” of personalities on the main organs of Russian power (21.01.2023)

2 “Indeks vlasti. Apdeyt za sentyabr’ 2021” [Power index. Updated version September 2021], *Index Davydov*. <https://>

These rankings confirm the stability of the composition of the Russian ruling elite. The 2005 “Top 100” of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* included 38 personalities that we find in the 2021 “Top 100”. The 2010 “Top 100”, included 58 of them. This is all the more true if we look at the top of the ranking: 14 members of the 2021 “Top 20” were already part of the “Top 100” in 2010.

→ The Piterisks spine

The several experts we asked to describe Russia’s ruling elite mention three groups among its ranks, according to the moment they came into Mr. Putin’s circle:

1) Those who became Putin’s companions before his accession to the presidency (27 according to our “Combined top 100”). They are either Piterisks (“Petersburgians”), namely those whom Mr. Putin met in his hometown and with whom he worked and forged relationships of trust at the turn of the 1990’s (Dmitry Medvedev, Dmitry Kozak, Alexey Kudrin, Igor Sechin, Yuri Kovalchuk, Gennady Timchenko, etc.), or “old” colleagues from the KGB, met during their studies (Sergey Naryshkin), in service in Saint Petersburg (Alexander Bortnikov, Sergey Ivanov, etc.) or in Dresden in the 1980’s (Nikolay Tokarev and Sergey Chemezov).

2) The oligarchs and other personalities “inherited” from the Yeltsin era (9 in the “Combined top 100”), as Roman Abramovich, Vladimir Potanin, Oleg Deripaska and Mikhail Fridman.

3) Those that then joined the regime (64), as the State Duma speaker Viacheslav Volodin and the Moscow mayor Sergey Sobyenin.

4) The expert Dmitry Gorenburg writes that “ most of the political elite originate in the government bureaucracy in Moscow or St. Petersburg or came to their positions of influence through personal ties to Vladimir Putin, either in St. Petersburg or in the security services. [In the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* “Top 100”] only ten percent came to power through electoral politics; another ten percent are businessmen who made their money independently of any connections to Vladimir Putin” (Gorenburg 2020).

The “ political capital of the Piterisky and “ old colleagues ” of Mr. Putin lays in their privileged access that they had and sometimes still have with the head of State.

If the early companions are only 27 in the “Combined top 100”, we should underline that they occupy very important positions: D. Medvedev was Head of State and Prime Minister, some are running the main law enforcement organs (A. Bortnikov - FSB, A. Bastrykin - Investigative Committee), other are the CEO of the largest public companies (A. Miller - Gazprom, I. Sechin - Rosneft, S. Chemezov - Rostec, N. Tokarev - Transneft, G. Gref - Sberbank). They form the backbone of Putin’s regime.

→ At the heart of the system, the siloviki

Our “Combined Top 100” includes 14% of siloviki if we stick to the positions they have. But their number jumps to 27 if we look at those who have a silovik education or who have spent part of their career in a law enforcement structure. The siloviki remain at the heart of the system, but many of them have become managers of the economy.

→ The ex-oligarchs remain in the game

The groups of oligarchs and other businessmen “inherited” from the Yeltsin era have for some remained in the game, despite they don’t enjoy V. Putin’s trust. The 2005 *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* ranking included sixteen private entrepreneurs, most of whom did not owe their fortune to Mr. Putin (oli-

davydov.in/politics/indeks-vlasti-apdejt-za-sentyabr-2021/ (21.01.2023)

garchs like R. Abramovich and Viktor Vekselberg, entrepreneurs like Vagit Alekperov, Lukoil's founder). But the 2021 "Top 100" only contains thirteen of these profiles. Among the latter, we count at least four persons that were "friends" during their youth with Mr. Putin or that became his collaborators in his Saint Petersburg (who owe their wealth to Putin, like G. Timchenko, the Rotenberg brothers and Y. Kovalchuk). This context makes the former oligarchs a fragile group, dependent on the power of the Piterisks and the Siloviki. Speaking about "oligarchs" about them is no longer relevant.

→ The civiliki rise

The third group, that of those who "later joined the ranks of the regime" (64 members of our "Combined Top 100"), includes technocrats, civil servants and politicians. The importance of this group testifies to a governance in which the State occupies a central place. Sociologist Ekaterina Schulman often points out that the "the Russian decision-making class is mostly bureaucratic" (Schulman 2018).

To put the things differently, we can also underline that the most important "bloc" is that of the members of the government (22% of the "Top 100"), before that of the siloviki (14%) and the presidential administration (13%). 83% of our "Combined top 100" hold a position in a "state institution".

Many have noticed the entry of technocrats into these rankings in recent years. The best known are the current Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin (former director of the Federal Tax Service), Anton Vaino (head of the presidential administration), and Alexandre Novak, Deputy Prime Minister in charge of energy. Their rise dates back fifteen years ago, when President Medvedev created the "managerial reserve". Then it has accelerated with the appointment in 2016 of Sergey Kiriyenko as head of the powerful Directorate of Internal policy of the presidential administration.

Kiriyenko is himself the prototype of a technocrat. He was Prime Minister in 1998 and head of the atomic agency Rosatom from 2005 to 2016. He promotes mechanisms for selecting the country's executives. In fact, he tries to replace political profiles and personalities that owe their position to Mr. Putin by individuals chosen for their technical skills.

2) A „Collective Putin“?

To understand the nature of the ruling elite that Mr. Putin has forged, we need to talk about the paradox that seems to characterize his regime. On the one hand, it is described as a "personalist autocracy" (ibid) and authoritarian, where the elites would be entirely subject to the head of State. At best in such a system, President Putin would just consult a few figures from the ruling elite for certain decisions.

On the other hand, many observers believe that the relationship between the autocrat and the ruling circles is more complex and shows that the president is more of a representative of part of the elite. Hence the idea of a "collective Putin", whether it is a sistema or some informal networks "which also constrains the leader" (Ledeneva 2013) or a president put at the supreme political power by the siloviki.³

Another version of the "Collective Putin" is that it is a group whose sole ambition is to get their hands on the wealth of the country. Some thus see in Putin's Russia a "commercial State" (Inozemtsev 2019). Others describe it as a "kleptocracy" or a "mafia state". But these theses are discussed and criticized by those who see Putin first and foremost as a "statesman" (Hill and Clifford 2013). In support

³ This is for example the thesis defended by Catherine Belton in her book *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West*, William Collins, April 2020, 624 p.

of this view of things, some point out that during the 2004-2008 re-nationalizations, the companies chosen were not the most profitable but the most strategic (Chernykh 2011).

The “autocratic Putin” and the “collective Putin” are not mutually exclusive. Their antinomy is resolved in the fact that the Putin elites have probably accepted to place in the hands of the head of state the right to impose his yoke on them. The heart of the Russian political problem would in fact be to establish peace between the powerful figures of the country. The Russian power seems to deeply fear seeing the elites fragmenting and fighting each other. For Mr. Putin and the circles close to him, the “tandemocracy” of the period when Mr. Medvedev was president (2008-2012) is a clear proof that a diarchy leads to the war of all against all in the elite.

This could explain why in 2004 there was the rumor that Mr. Putin did not want to serve a second term: his “inner circle spent considerable time and effort persuading him not to step down”, writes journalist Mikhail Zygar (Zygar 2016, 344). Two of the very most powerful men from the president’s entourage came to him then: Yuri Kovalchuk, one of the Saint Petersburg friends and business partner who became a billionaire, and Nikolay Patrushev, another Pytersky and KGB officer, now head of the Security Council. “The primary source of their well-being lay in their proximity to the President,” Zygar points out. Kovalchuk and Patrushev are also pillars of the ideology specific to this regime, made up of authoritarianism, social conservatism, patriotism, imperialism, that turn to be essentially anti-West. These “values” are more those of Putin’s own circles than of business circles and former-oligarchs.

We should stress on that from 2014 (Crimea annexation), there has been a narrowing of the decision-making circle. It reached its simplest expression on February 21, 2022, for the launch of the invasion of Ukraine. The Security Council of that day, where President Putin brought together Russia’s key collaborators to decide whether or not to recognize the so-called “people’s republics” of Donbass, tends to make people believe that the Russian regime is now a true autocracy.

3) An inclusive system

Our “Combined top 100” ranking shows how diverse Russia’s current ruling circles are. It gives the impression that almost no one has been left behind. The cases of the “deposed” oligarchs, like Berezovsky and Khodorkovsky, should not be the trees that hide the forest. With these resounding affairs, Mr. Putin certainly wanted to eliminate the oligarchy “as a class” (in reality it was about eliminating them as a political group only), but above all to establish a new contract between the Kremlin and the business circles.

Putin’s power is fundamentally elitist. “Putin’s regime (...) is in no way populist, but rather even anti-populist”, says the political scientist Vladimir Gel’man⁴. This vision is increasingly shared by the elites, as they enter into a “dynamics of legitimization and social reproduction”. They are now trying to legitimize their position by relying on various ideologies (whether religious, Darwinist or libertarian as the Chilean dictatorship of Pinochet) (Schimpfössl 2020).

There is a feeling in the Russian ruling circles that it is crucial for this authoritarian regime “to avoid violent elite conflict. (...) The repressions in the elites [that will arrive if we allow discord to be established], if they are massive, represent a serious threat for the regime”⁵. An obsession of Mr. Putin

4 “Avtoritarnye rezhimy rushatsya iz-za vnutrennikh konfliktov, a ne iz-za protestnykh vystupleniy” Politolog Vladimir Gel’man ” [The authoritarian regimes collapse because of internal conflicts, not because of protests, an interview with Vladimir Guelman].

5 „Avtoritarnye rezhimy... “ [The authoritarian regimes collapse because of internal conflicts, not because of protests,

and the people he brought to power is that of letting an oligarchy re-emerge, both because of the chaos it has engendered in their eyes and the political and capitalist influence it gave to the West in Russia.

This is probably one of the reasons why the Kremlin doesn't want to leave anyone important from the country's business elite out of the regime. It is as if the watchword of elitist politics is that "for any member of the system, the advantages of belonging to the system far outweigh any damage that the external world can inflict" (Schulman 2018, 13). The contract offered to the oligarchs in the wake of the Khodorkovsky affair was the renunciation of politics in exchange for the creation of an extraordinary business climate for those concerned: a 13% "flat tax" on income, labor code tailor-made for employers, transnational mobility of capital, etc. The Putin regime was built with and for the ruling circles, if they demonstrate their absolute loyalty. "Two-thirds of billionaires entered the [Forbes] list after 2006", says Daniel Treisman (Treisman 2016).

Finally, this regime retains some variety in its ruling circles, but is built around the president and his key loyalists. But we also find in these elites "patches" from Putin circles, such as former oligarchs from the Yeltsin era (who can enjoy an enviable position, such as Vladimir Potanin, 2nd richest person in Russia), businessmen (including Vladimir Lisin, the richest man in the country) and captains of industry (like Leonid Mikhelson, CEO of the gas company Novatek) who have built their business rather out of Putinism, and a large number of civil servants and technocrats who serve the system.

Mr. Putin's friends who became billionaires, like his teenage judo friends G. Timchenko and the Rotenberg brothers, and his business partners since the "Ozero cooperative" time as Y. Kovalchuk, that medias are much talking about, represented in 2020 only 6% of the 386 billion assets held by the hundred richest people in Russia (private businesses), according to the Forbes "billionaires list". Their power comes first from their access to the president.

This power comes also from the fact that Mr. Putin entrusts them with very important missions for the regime, such as controlling part of the media sector (which Kovalchuk does with NMG, National Media Group). It can also mean being the eye of Mr. Putin in some strategic companies, as Mr. Timchenko does with Novatek.

Everyone's mission ultimately comes down to contribute to build and strengthen the Russian state and Mr. Putin's personal regime. This is how the large public companies have all been entrusted to people close to Mr. Putin. The most emblematic case is that of Igor Sechin, who was given the task of building a public oil giant, which has become an armed wing on the global geopolitical scene, and who can therefore use all the means for that. Even if it means threatening the general interest: forced nationalization of the company Bachneft to the chagrin of the business community, bond issue in 2015 which caused the ruble to plunge, refusal to reduce its production within the framework of the OPEC + agreements, etc.

Let us emphasize the key role for the maintenance of the regime played by the siloviki. As one can read in a Center Dossier report: "It is through the FSB that shadow control of the entire power system takes place: in addition to direct functions, intelligence officers are involved in the solving political and economic problems in the interests of Vladimir Putin, his entourage or the presidential administration"⁶. The siloviki ensure that everyone remains loyal to the regime.

an interview with Vladimir Guelman], op. cit.

6 „Lubyanskaya Federatsiya Kak FSB opredelyayet politiku i ekonomiku Rossii“ [Lubyanka Federation. How the FSB determines Russia's Politics and Economics], Center Dossier, 12 June 2020. <https://fsb.dossier.center/> (21.01.2023)

4) An entrepreneurial management

While Putin’s regime is inclusive of its ruling elites, it is only inclusive of those who demonstrate complete loyalty. For those who accept the rules of the game, they then have to show their loyalty by contributing to the life and prosperity of the system. This is done most often according to an entrepreneurial approach, where the elite members are encouraged to take initiatives, to serve the regime. At the beginning of 2020, the political adviser to a major figure in Russian politics explained to us that “most often, the head of State launches ideas, projects. And it is up to everyone to come up with good initiatives for them to succeed. If their proposals do not hold up, they are rejected. This is how the national interest, as seen by Mr. Putin, is ensured.”

Of course, the question of the access to the head of State is crucial. This entrepreneurial logic is the daily life of Russian ruling circles. One of the most remarkable examples of recent years is that of Igor Sechin, when he decided in the spring of 2020 to invest between 500 million and a billion dollars in genetic research projects. The Rosneft CEO surprised everyone by putting so much money in a sector so far from his mission. But in the end he killed three birds with one stone.

First, it serves the interests of the country as set by Mr. Putin, who believes that maintaining Russia among the great powers depends on its ability to be a leader in the new technologies field (IT, artificial intelligence, etc). Then, it allows him to stay in contact with key figures from Putin’s closest circle, such as the Kovalchuk brothers. Finally, he renders an almost personal service to Mr. Putin, since one of his daughters (Maria Vorontsova) sits on the board of directors of the organization created for this project financed by Rosneft.

With the same entrepreneurial approach, Yuri and Mikhaïl Kovalchuk have invested in the field of science, in particular nuclear power (they control the famous Kurchatov institute), genetic research and bioengineering, artificial intelligence, the all being enshrine in an anti-Western ideological. In the new technologies sector, many initiatives are taken by Sergey Chemezov and his teams, IT being one of the keys to maintaining the Russian military-industrial complex in the world top. The way in which German Gref modernized the Sberbank also relates to the services rendered to the regime.

In all other areas, the same logic is at work. Arkady Rotenberg had thus to build the Crimean Bridge, after the annexation of the Peninsula in 2014. The ex-oligarchs Vladimir Potanin and Oleg Deripaska were asked to build sites for the Winter Olympics in Sochi, in 2014. Some support to the regime are more personal, such as when businessmen take stakes in companies belonging to those close to Mr. Putin, which is the case of Alexei Mordashov when he entered to the capital of the Rossiya bank and the Group of NMG media, controlled by Yuri Kovalchuk. In this approach, Iskander Makhmudov and Andrey Bokarev would have “helped Putin associate Gennadiy Timchenko to transfer assets, and circumvent the impact of sanctions placed on him by the US government for his role in the 2014 Russian attacks on Ukraine”(Zaslavskiy 2021).

Even those who want to get out of the game, like the ex-oligarch Viktor Vekselberg, CEO of Renova who made his money in energy, minerals and telecoms, are forced to work for the system if they want to continue to make business in their country. Unable to enjoy oligarch status after Putin came to power, Vekselberg internationalized his business and changed his way of doing business. Thus, he wanted to pull Russia towards a more liberal governance, by betting on the new technologies sector. He then initiated some cooperation between Silicon Valley and Skolkovo, the center of technological innovation in Moscow.

Internationally, the services rendered to the Kremlin are also welcome. It can be whether in the form of strategic economic investments for Russia, getting closer to influential foreign personalities (as did Dmitry Rybolovlev with Donald Trump, when he was candidate for the White House)⁷, taking a role in the Kremlin's geopolitical endeavors (as did Konstantin Malofeev, the “Orthodox oligarch” who financed the “separatist” armed militias in Donbass in 2014, and the private military company Wagner, founded by Evgeny Prigozhin).

5) Towards dissensions?

Mr. Putin and the circles around him fear divisions within the ruling elite more than anything. The diarchy during the Medvedev presidency (2008 – 2012) led to some dissensions within the system. According to sociologist Olga Kryshstanovskaya, “these protest movements [against Putin's return to the Kremlin] could only appear because they were supported by part of the elite” (Viktorov 2014). Behind an apparent split between the liberal poles (then more or less behind Medvedev) and the conservative, the question was the one of the access to resources and power.

Once back in the Kremlin in 2012, Putin placed his third presidential term under the notion of conservatism. This new approach went hand in hand with an increasingly anti-Western policy, culminating in the war in Ukraine in 2014. Mr. Putin ensures that the liberal pole stays in the game, but we see them losing ground. For his part, the head of State remains convinced that the place of Russia in the international scene relies heavily on the efficiency of economic management (synonymous for him with some liberalism). Since the start of the 2022 war, conservatives/statists have redoubled their criticisms against liberals.

However, it seems to us that the liberal/conservative split is not fully relevant to understand the dynamics within the Russian elite. Perhaps it is better to look at each other's interests, in terms of finances or career prospects. Those who work in the economic sector do not think like siloviki. As close Putin as Andrey Kostin for example, the VTB bank CEO, was “in mourning” after the launch of the war in Ukraine (Roustamova 2022).

Tatiana Stanovaya insists in her recent analyzes on the confrontation between “State oligarchs, politically powerful and economically influential, and a group of security officials and technocrats obsessed with security and control?” (Stanovaia 2022) The intra-elite consensus is cracking, she explains, “a number of serious signs point to the fact that differences between different groups of figures close to power in Russia not only have appeared, but are intensifying, from more, against the background of the weakening of the president's arbitration function”.

Hence “the emergence of a new trend: personalities such as Yuri Kovalchuk or Sergey Chemezov are increasingly concerned about the expansion of the security forces. (...) This does not mean [that they] suddenly became liberal. They remain conservative and anti-Western,” Stanovaya explains. According to her, this is why Kovalchuk discreetly financed the “Novye lyudi” (“New people”) party, which with its liberal and pro-business positioning entered Parliament in September 2021 with thirteen deputies.

The radicalization of part of the elite during the war that began on February 24, 2022 mainly concerns civil servants, whether siloviki or technocrats. This is what the journalist Andrey Pertsev noticed about the “party of war”. Analyzing the behavior of Ramzan Kadyrov, head of Chechnya,

⁷ Agathe Duparc and Anastasia Kirilenko, “ Sur la piste des camarades oligarques russes de Trump ” [On the trail of Trump's Russian oligarch comrades], Mediapart, 11 March 2017.

Dmitry Medvedev, vice-president of the Security Council, and Andrei Turtchak, general secretary of the United Russia party, he shows that the common situation of these hawks is that they “have reached the career ceiling (...) [Besides], they have nothing to lose in terms of property, (...) even if, of course, they are very, very rich people [but incomparably less than the billionaires]” (Pertsev 2022).

Conclusion

Mr. Putin’s system seems powerful, controlled and shaped in such a way that no influential group is able to destroy it. This is possible thanks to the carrot (the system allows each powerful group and person to benefit from it, politically or economically) and the stick (the role of the siloviki is crucial in preventing disloyalty). For now, despite the unprecedented series of sanctions decreed by the West because of the aggression of Ukraine, 99 of the 100 most influential personalities of the Russian elite have remained loyal to the regime (only Mr. Chubais defected).

The Putin system is inclusive and gives everyone in the elite a role for which they are rewarded if they display perfect loyalty to the Kremlin. The latter still has the means to make it more advantageous for members of the Russian ruling elite to stay in the system than to leave it. But how long it will last?

As resources become scarcer, due to global demand for oil and gas, which is expected to decline due to the energy transition and now due to international sanctions, competition is likely to increase among the members of the Russian elite. The more things go, the more people will have interest in leaving the system than staying in it. But they will only do so after defending their chances inside the country. The problem appears all the more acute as the question of Mr. Putin’s succession looms. The autocratic and authoritarian nature of the regime makes it almost impossible during his lifetime, as he has become the keystone of the Russian political system.

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