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RUSSIA TOMORROW:
NAVIGATING A NEW PARADIGM

ALL THE AUTOCRAT'S MEN:
The Court Politics of Putin's Inner Circle

by Mikhail Zygar



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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 challenged much of the common Western understanding of Russia. How can the world better understand Russia? What are the steps forward for Western policy? The Eurasia Center's new "Russia Tomorrow" series seeks to reevaluate conceptions of Russia today and better prepare for its future tomorrow.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 2

THE PRIME MINISTER AND HIS TEAM 3

THE PRINCE AND HIS FATHER 5

THE STRATEGIST AND HIS PATRON 7

THE FAR RIGHT AND THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH 10

THE ARMY AND ITS CLONES 12

THE FORMER SUCCESSOR AND MR. HYDE 13

LURKING LIBERALS 15

A NEW SYSTEM 18

ABOUT THE AUTHOR 19

INTRODUCTION

There will be very little suspense surrounding Russia's presidential election this month. Vladimir Putin will certainly win a fifth term as Kremlin leader. This is because Russian elections are not elections. Instead, they are mobilization and legitimization rituals in which the results are preordained. And even such a shock as opposition leader Alexei Navalny's death probably won't change this.

But the lack of suspense surrounding the result of the vote does not mean that it will not be meaningful. On the contrary, this ritual is a political watershed that will determine the landscape in Russia for years to come—and possibly what Russia will look like after Putin finally passes from the scene. That is because, in the absence of institutions, Russian politics are effectively court politics, dominated by the clan battles within the Kremlin leader's inner circle.

What is the state of the "Putin court?" And how has Russia's war against Ukraine influenced the clan battles that define it? Why does the Kremlin seek to leverage traditional conservative values and the Russian Orthodox Church? This report is based on extensive interviews with dozens of current and former Russian officials who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the inner workings of the Kremlin power elite without fear of reprisals.

THE PRIME MINISTER AND HIS TEAM

The most important question surrounding the election is not who is going to be the president, but rather who is going to become the prime minister. Once he is elected president for a new term, Putin will have an excuse to dismiss the government and form a new one. And under the Russian Federation's constitution, the prime minister is the second in command—the one who will become the next president if Putin dies or is otherwise incapacitated. The current prime minister is Mikhail Mishustin, who assumed the role in January 2020. According to the constitution, he would become president if Putin passed from the scene.

Therefore, a key question is whether Putin will replace Mishustin. The incumbent prime minister, of course, is doing everything possible to remain in office. His main disadvantage is that he is not sufficiently connected to the war. He is too much of a technocrat, which is what Putin's ideal prime minister in 2020 was supposed to be—a faceless bureaucrat who follows orders perfectly, knows how to deal with the economy, and has a reputation as an effective manager without political ambitions. But the past year has changed everything.

When Russia launched its full-scale invasion in February 2022, the idea was that the war should be discreet, quick, and victorious. And despite mounting evidence to the contrary, the Kremlin refused to believe that this was impossible. By 2023, however, it became obvious that the strategy had to change. Now it's called a holy war against the West, a clash of civilizations, and a war for the survival of the Russian people. To be sure, there is a lot of exaggerated drama in this new paradigm, and initially no one took it seriously. But by the end of 2023, the Russian political elite began to assimilate it, and some even started believing it. For a Russia that is waging a holy war, Mishustin is not suitable—he is too liberal. That's the main argument in favor of replacing him, the most prominent proponent of which is Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev.

Mishustin does have an important advantage, and it is the same as his main disadvantage: He is not trying to be associated with the war, he is not trying to be in the spotlight, and he is behaving exactly as an exemplary Putin prime minister should. But many in Putin's inner circle believe that Mishustin has been too successful a prime minister to remain in office. His government handled the COVID-19 crisis, and some argue that he helped save the country from economic collapse in 2022. Therefore, to prevent Mishustin from becoming too powerful as a political figure, according to Putin's logic, he should be removed.

Who would replace him? Of all the members of the current government, one name stands out: Marat Khusnullin, one of the most influential political figures

in Russia. Khusnullin is the deputy prime minister in charge of **construction**, meaning he oversees **rebuilding** the Russian-occupied Ukrainian regions. That means he controls large budgets and is a key patron of the new elites in the occupied parts of the Donbas. It also means that he is on the rise regardless of Mishustin's fate.

THE PRINCE AND HIS FATHER

Who else could be the new prime minister? And would that figure be Putin's potential successor? If we go by Putin's old practices, it will be someone who is not regarded as a contender for the post of prime minister—because the Russian president is maniacally fond of surprises.

Nevertheless, there are a few influential front-runners. And the first of these is Minister of Agriculture Dmitry Patrushev, the son of a longtime Putin associate who was the head of the Federal Security Service (FSB) and now serves as the Security Council secretary. The appointment of the younger Patrushev, however, would mean only one thing—his father, Nikolai, has become so influential that he has managed to appoint his son as heir to the throne. With a sane and capable Putin, such an option is hardly possible—as this could be his last decision.

It is noteworthy that such a transition of power from Putin to Patrushev is even predicted in popular fiction. In Vladimir Sorokin's 2006 cult novel, *The Day of the Oprichnik*, Russia is completely isolated from the outside world. An almost medieval monarchy has been established and is ruled by the son of Nikolai Platonovich (which is Patrushev's first name and patronymic).

Nikolai Patrushev is indeed one of the most influential people in modern Russia. And his importance has only increased since the war began. It is often Patrushev who makes the most important foreign policy statements. Patrushev is the ideologue of modern Russian anti-Americanism. Last September he published an article entitled "The Collapse of the Parasite States," in which he essentially laid out Russia's new foreign policy doctrine: It should unite with the countries of the Global South and fight against the neocolonial West.

Patrushev's influence has also recently become the subject of curious rumors: For example, a popular Russian conspiracy theorist, Valery Solovey, claims that the real Putin died in October 2023 and that Patrushev is running the country, using Putin's doppelgänger. (Sources in Moscow, however, treat this as disinformation launched by the Russian security services to discredit the Russian independent media in exile by baiting them into rebroadcasting delusional conspiracies.)

In addition, it was Patrushev who was named in a recent *Wall Street Journal* investigation as the organizer of Yevgeny Prigozhin's killing in August 2023, an account Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov likened to "pulp fiction." However, according to sources, Patrushev is not in a position to directly command the army or the FSB. His main strength lies in his influence on Putin.

The FSB, in turn, is a colossal iceberg, a state within a state, which influences everything, primarily economic processes in the country. The FSB is the most important player in any region, the most important partner for any large corporation. However, the FSB does not seem to engage directly in political initiatives. The most important generals of the FSB—its director, Alexander Bortnikov; his first deputy, Sergei Korolev; and the head of the FSB's so-called second service (Russia's modern secret police), Aleksey Sedov—are not independent political players. They have constant contact with Putin, and enjoy some influence over him, but will remain inside the structure.

THE STRATEGIST AND HIS PATRON

One Kremlin figure who is likely to be a key political player is Sergei Kiriyenko, the first deputy chief of staff in charge of all domestic politics. Kiriyenko is also responsible for the presidential elections this month. This means that Kiriyenko's office will decide which candidates will be allowed to run, how the campaign will go, and how many votes the candidates will get.

Whether or not Putin views the elections as a success will determine whether Kiriyenko will retain his position or not. He has overseen domestic policy in the Kremlin for six years and has proven himself to be an effective and completely unscrupulous Kremlin strategist. But after this election, a variety of sources in Moscow say, he could be replaced. And that could mean the beginning of a new era in Russian politics.

Despite being just sixty-one years old, Kiriyenko is one of the most remarkable survivors in Russian politics. His career peaked in April 1998, when Russia's first president, Boris Yeltsin, shockingly appointed the then-unknown thirty-five-year-old Kiriyenko as prime minister. It was a decision so unexpected (and ill-conceived) that the young Kiriyenko immediately earned the nickname "Kinder Surprise." His premiership turned out to be the shortest and most unsuccessful in Russian history. His government defaulted on the government's debts, and he resigned in August 1998.

Kiriyenko then became the head of the liberal Union of Right Forces political party. Boris Nemtsov, one of the most popular Russian democrats of the 1990s, was the number two on that party's list. After Putin was first elected president in March 2000, Kiriyenko did not continue his political career, instead leaving parliament and becoming a bureaucrat again. For eleven years, he headed the state-owned corporation Rosatom, which manages all of Russia's nuclear power plants. And in 2016—a year and a half after Nemtsov had been shot dead across the street from the Kremlin—Putin unexpectedly brought Kiriyenko back to the Kremlin as supervisor of Russian domestic policy.

Throughout his years in power, Kiriyenko has demonstrated that he is extremely loyal to Putin and that he is a technocrat without any beliefs or values. Kiriyenko was also keen to demonstrate that he had no political ambitions—after all, ambition was the reason why the Kremlin's previous chief political strategist, Vyacheslav Volodin, was fired. Volodin wanted so badly to succeed Putin and made little secret of his desire; in 2016, he was demoted to the far lesser position of chair of the State Duma, the lower chamber of the Russian parliament.

Kiriyenko has a very powerful patron, Putin's closest friend, Yuri Kovalchuk, the most powerful businessman in the country. It was Kovalchuk who lobbied for Kiriyenko's appointment as domestic policy curator in 2016. Kovalchuk is, according to the US government, "the **personal banker** for senior officials of the Russian Federation including Putin."

Kovalchuk is the only real Russian oligarch—that is, a businessman who seriously influences Putin. He became a major player in Russian politics after he managed to put his man, Kiriyenko, in a key position in the Kremlin. However, his role grew even stronger in 2020, when the pandemic prompted Putin to go into a strict quarantine while **vacationing** with **Kovalchuk** at the presidential residence in Valdai, between Moscow and Saint Petersburg.

Kovalchuk is the owner of a bank with the symbolic name Rossiya. He also manages almost all of Russia's nominally private but de facto state-controlled media, including the Channel One television station. Kovalchuk has been close friends with Putin since the early 1990s, and in 1996 the two of them and a few friends co-founded the Ozero dacha cooperative near Saint Petersburg. By 2020, Kovalchuk had finally established himself as the most influential member of the president's inner circle.

Although Kovalchuk owns key media outlets, the Kremlin has two officials in charge of state propaganda, per long-standing tradition. Alexei Gromov, Putin's former press secretary, oversees traditional media (i.e., television), while Kiriyenko oversees new media (i.e., the internet). Kiriyenko's son, Vladimir, is CEO of Russia's most important digital holding company, VK. It is the younger Kiriyenko who oversees the process of luring Russian audiences away from YouTube to domestic platforms.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the importance of both Kovalchuk and Kiriyenko in Russian politics has dramatically increased. Kovalchuk still communicates regularly with Putin, while many officials who were considered close to the president have lost their access to him. And Kiriyenko's role has expanded, too. In addition to domestic policy, he is now in charge of politics in the four Ukrainian regions currently occupied by Russia.

Kiriyenko is also the Kremlin's chief personnel officer, selecting Russia's governors. In this capacity, Kiriyenko has cultivated a new generation of regional officials—most of whom are under sixty—a potential source of power and influence. And he established the so-called governors' school, an ideological training center for aspiring regional elites.

Kiriyenko's growing influence has attracted the attention of his political enemies, most notably his Kremlin predecessor Volodin and powerful players in the security services led by the elder Patrushev. They are trying to undermine Kiriyenko by suggesting to Putin that he dreams of returning to the prime minister's post. Kremlin sources say the deputy head of the presidential administration dreams of correcting past mistakes, getting rid of the humiliating nickname "Kinder Surprise," and proving that he can be an effective head of government. However, Kiriyenko's chances of becoming prime minister are nil. He could lose

his high post if Putin decides that Kiriyenko has become too influential—and not even Kovalchuk would be able to protect him in that case.

Just before the new year, Kiriyenko stole Volodin's favorite topic. Previously, it had been the speaker of the Duma who usually acted as the main champion of "traditional values" and fighter against the LGBTQI+ community. But in December 2023, it was Kiriyenko who led a campaign against several pop stars who attended a controversial "naked party," a scandalous event that dominated Russian news coverage late in the year.

THE FAR RIGHT AND THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

Russia's war against Ukraine has greatly increased the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church and its head, Patriarch Kirill. Though he had been akin to an ordinary head of a state corporation—the church is constitutionally separate from the state, but has become a de facto bureaucratic structure dependent on the state—Patriarch Kirill is now a member of Putin's informal Politburo.

His elevation was symbolized by the recent World Russian People's Council, a nationalist gathering that proclaimed the supremacy of the Russian ethnicity, called for a fight against migration, and demanded a ban on abortion—all in the same Kremlin hall where the Soviet Union's Communist Party congresses were once held.

The World Russian People's Council was once considered a marginal organization. It was established thirty years ago under the Russian Orthodox Church with Patriarch Kirill as its chairman. In 2019, the council tapped as its deputy chairman Konstantin Malofeyev, described by the US Justice Department as a "Kremlin-linked Russian oligarch" who personally helped finance Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine's Donbas region in 2014. Malofeyev, who has never hidden his neo-fascist views, has run the far-right television station Tsargrad TV since 2013. However, the most famous figure on the Russian far right is not Malofeyev but his ally, Alexander Dugin, the neofascist philosopher and former editor-in-chief of Tsargrad TV.

This 2023 Council included "working groups" attended by Dugin, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, more than a dozen governors, several ministers, and several leading officials of the Russian Orthodox Church. In other words, for the first time, the unofficial but de facto Russian fascist party showed its face.

For many years, Western political scientists have written about Dugin's strong influence on Putin—even though it appears that the two men have never met in person. Nevertheless, his ideology has finally become official because it is now used by the head of the Russian Orthodox Church.

During the 2023 World Russian People's Council, Patriarch Kirill proposed a new Russian doctrine that can fairly be described as fascist. He claimed that there are superior nations (that can create empires) and second-class nations (that can-

not). He stated that today's "Russian world," which asserts that Russia has the right to rule over the lands of the former Russian empire, is a continuation of a long tradition following the pax Romana, pax Hispanica, pax Britannica, and pax Americana. He argued that Russia should restrict the flow of incoming migrants, because many of them do not respect Russian culture. Then he urged the banning of abortion to alleviate Russia's demographic decline.

Contrary to conventional wisdom in the West, the Russian Orthodox Church is not an important social or spiritual institution in Russia. According to surveys by the independent sociological service Levada Center, on average only 1 percent of Russians go to church on Sundays, and more than 65 percent of the population believes that religion does not play a significant role in their lives. Yet Putin's regime is doing everything to strengthen the church as a political institution. Earlier this year, for example, one of the most famous icons in Russia, a work by fifteenth-century artist Andrei Rublev, was moved from the Tretyakov Gallery to the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Pilgrims are now taken by bus from neighboring regions and long lines of believers can be seen, as they wait to view the icon in the cathedral. Before the new year, however, when the icon was hanging in the Tretyakov Gallery, there was no queue.

Putin is less interested in the church as such and more interested in popularizing far-right rhetoric. In this sense, the proposed abortion ban and the campaign against the LGBTQI+ community fits a broader Kremlin political strategy of advancing an illiberal agenda to win Putin supporters in the Global South and among Western conservatives. This is a very pragmatic plan—and it basically doesn't matter that no one in Putin's entourage seriously cares about these issues. The Kremlin believes that liberal values are a tool of the West, so it tries to use the opposite rhetoric to fight the West, especially since so-called traditional values are gaining more and more supporters not only in the Global South, but also in Europe and the United States.

Despite this, no far-right politicians have been allowed to participate in the upcoming presidential elections. Putin is the only candidate to use this populist rhetoric.

THE ARMY AND ITS CLONES

From the very beginning of the war, Putin was afraid of the growing popularity of the army. He did not want his generals to get too much social support. This was why Prigozhin and his Wagner Group got the initial assignment of a major role in the conflict. According to Kremlin sources, Putin instructed Prigozhin to neutralize Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and his generals—to criticize them through the media, trolls, and bots under his control. However, the result exceeded expectations. Prigozhin became so enthusiastic that he himself became that very military commander who gained popularity at Putin's expense.

Along with Prigozhin, radical supporters of the war—ultranationalists who criticized Putin for his lack of decisiveness and resolve—began to grow in popularity. After Prigozhin's mutiny in the summer of 2023, these elements were purged. For example, Igor Girkin, aka Strelkov, the army and **FSB veteran** who led Russian paramilitary forces in eastern Ukraine in 2014, was charged **with extremism** last year and in January was **convicted and sentenced to four years in prison**. Prigozhin's death in an airplane crash widely believed to have been orchestrated by the Kremlin removed him and the Wagner Group from the scene. The elite tried to forget about the troublesome mercenary leader, as if he had never existed. A new status quo has been adopted: No more private armies; everything must be under the control of the state and the defense ministry. All military spending passes through Shoigu. And no generals become public figures or folk heroes.

There is, however, an important figure with a military background who appears to be a rising political star—a possible prime minister or defense minister, and a potential successor to Putin: Aleksey Dyumin, Putin's former bodyguard, who has served as governor of the Tula region since 2016.

In 2014, at the head of the "special operations forces" (a structure within the Ministry of Defense), Dyumin played a key role in the occupation and annexation of Crimea. As deputy defense minister, Dyumin also supervised the establishment of the Wagner Group. And, according to sources, it was Dyumin who played an important role in negotiations between Prigozhin and the Kremlin during the infamous mutiny of June 24, 2023. Notably, it was in Tula Oblast, a region controlled by Dyumin, where Prigozhin's troops stopped their march toward Moscow and turned around.

For years, Dyumin was Putin's personal aide, one of the president's closest and most trusted people. He has been a governor for nearly a decade and has proven his loyalty to Putin, which means he could be in Moscow next year.

THE FORMER SUCCESSOR AND MR. HYDE

A man who does not aspire to be prime minister or the Kremlin's chief ideologue but is still a prominent figure in the power structure is Dmitry Medvedev. Over the past two years, the former president and prime minister has emerged as one of the most puzzling—and disturbing—figures in Putin's inner circle.

A onetime liberal technocrat, a fan of gadgets and high tech, and an erstwhile buddy of then US President Barack Obama, Medvedev once seemed to be a democrat. Then, suddenly, like a werewolf, he has turned into a bloodthirsty boor threatening Ukraine and the West with the language of a gangster. What happened to Medvedev? While some media reports have suggested chronic drunkenness, that is not the case, according to several informed sources. Instead, this shift is a matter of cold political calculation. Today's Russia requires such a transformation.

While still president, Medvedev was the object of universal ridicule—his nickname on the internet was "pathetic." Videos of him dancing ridiculously or photos showing him sleeping at public events, including the opening and closing of the Olympic Games, were circulated online.

Until January 2020, Medvedev still hoped he would be Putin's successor. From 2012 until early 2020, he behaved like Putin's model prime minister, much like Mishustin behaves now. Medvedev kept his head down and said nothing at all, although, unlike Mishustin, he did almost nothing.

In January 2020, Putin unexpectedly fired Medvedev as premier, inventing for him the previously nonexistent position of deputy chairman of the security council. No one knew it at the time, but the following month the COVID-19 pandemic would come, and Medvedev's departure as prime minister saved him from wrestling with that crisis. Still, his hopes of succeeding Putin appeared to be dead.

But the invasion of Ukraine two years later awakened Medvedev from his hibernation. "Dmitry the Pathetic" suddenly transformed into "Dmitry the Terrible." Medvedev's once intelligent and thoughtful Telegram channel suddenly became a model of monstrous rudeness. Speaking about US President Joe Biden, Medvedev writes that he is "an old man with clear signs of progressive dementia" and that his family is corrupt. He writes that European leaders have diarrhea

from fear of Russia. And here's what he wrote on January 3: "We never liked the French. Kind of froggy, fought with us. And generally, fa**ots. And [now I'm] convinced of it. I wrote the French Foreign Ministry. They called the strike on Belgorod with cluster munition a 'right to self-defense.' Scum. Sons of a whore. Assholes."

In fact, according to sources close to Medvedev, most of these posts were not written by him (probably excluding the last one). With the outbreak of the war, a huge staff of new consultants and speechwriters has been hired for him to build up his militaristic and imperialistic bona fides.

The creation of a new image of Medvedev—not as a liberal, but as an obscurantist—is linked to his hopes of regaining the presidency. Medvedev remembers that in 2011, before he departed the presidency, Putin assured him that he would be the president again. So, he believes there is a chance. In 2022, sources say, Putin again hinted to Medvedev that the plan is on track—that he just must be a strong politician who fits the historical moment. This came shortly after the April 2022 death of Vladimir Zhirinovsky, the most militant populist in Russian politics. Medvedev understood he had to take up Zhirinovsky's mantle if he wanted to be popular.

In recent years, Medvedev has done exactly what he thought he could do to regain the presidency. As prime minister, he sat quietly and inconspicuously, not interfering with anyone, so as not to make new enemies and not to upset Putin. Then the time of inactivity passed. Medvedev now believes that he needs to be aggressive and belligerent. This is Medvedev's cold calculation for the post-war future. Medvedev is not alone in the race; boorishness and imperialism have already become the default tone in Russian politics (Russian diplomats, for example, do not miss opportunities to swear). But Medvedev is clearly trying harder than anyone else.

It is ironic that the mouthpiece of today's Russian fascism is a man who was once considered the hope of democracy. There is no doubt that Medvedev has no political future. He no longer has his own team, and even those who used to be close to him have turned their backs on him. He could not earn the trust of the intelligentsia even when he was president, and he cannot earn the trust of the imperialists, who consider him a weakling. And most importantly, he cannot be Putin's successor because he would not exist politically without Putin. A puppet does not function without a puppeteer.

LURKING LIBERALS

The largest clan in the Russian government is, oddly enough, the so-called systemic liberals. This is the name given to those who served under former President Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s or have advocated a pro-Western course for Russia, yet at the same time have broadly supported Putin. This faction, despite appearances to the contrary, still holds a very important place in the Russian political elite. The camp of "systemic liberals" enjoyed its peak of influence during the Medvedev presidency, from 2008 to 2012, but their sway has ebbed significantly in the decade since.

Liberals have never been a single clan, but rather several disparate groups that may only partially consider themselves like-minded. The most prominent liberals in Russia in the past were Anatoly Chubais (former deputy prime minister and finance minister under Yeltsin) and Anatoly Kudrin (former deputy prime minister and finance minister under Putin). After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Chubais left the country and Kudrin left public service, resigning as head of the Accounts Chamber to became head of Russia's main tech company, Yandex.

However, a significant number of Russian officials in charge of the economy can still be considered liberals, most notably the current finance minister, Anton Siluanov, and the central bank head, Elvira Nabiullina. Typical of systemic liberals, they never express their opinion if it contradicts Putin's, and they will never argue with the president. It is true that Nabiullina was going to resign after the attack on Ukraine, but Putin would not accept her resignation. After that, she is widely believed to have saved the Russian financial system from disaster following Western sanctions.

After the war began, the FSB (with the tacit consent of former liberal Kiriyenko) began a demonstrative crackdown on liberals. The arrest and eventual release of Vladimir Mau, rector of the Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, the very university in which the "Kiriyenko school of governors" was established, was indicative. Ten years ago, Mau, together with Yaroslav Kuzminov, rector of the Moscow Higher School of Economics (and husband of Nabiullina), was commissioned by Putin to write *Strategy 2020*, an ambitious plan for the development of the Russian economy. Back then, before the annexation of Crimea, there was a strong conviction that Russia's future lay in a liberal market economy, innovation, and overcoming dependence on raw materials. Systemic liberals rationalized Russia's authoritarian political system, arguing that they needed to be patient and implement economic reforms first. Mau was one of the main proponents of this approach.

What do the systemic liberals believe? A key tenet seems to be tolerance of Putin, despite his authoritarian policies, for the sake of maintaining their power and influence. Even as the economy has become more and more state-cen-

tric and the political system more autocratic, "systemic liberals" have generally remained stoic.

Sometimes it seemed that the real reason for the silence and patience of the "systemic liberals" was their unwillingness to break away from the trough—their attempt to maintain their proximity to power. Perhaps they convinced themselves that they were sacrificing themselves for the future of Russia, even if that meant working side by side with the FSB.

The result of this stoic patience, however, has been escalating repression against the systemic liberals and the steady decline of their influence. In 2016, former Economics Minister Alexei Ulyukayev was humiliatingly arrested and **jailed** until April 2022. The campaign against the Higher School of Economics (HSE), the most popular and high-quality university in Russia, was next. Its rector, Kuzminov, was allowed to resign quietly. This is important because the HSE not only influences young minds, but is a colossal property with hundreds of buildings in Moscow and across the country. After Kuzminov's departure, the changes began lightning fast—during the past few years, all professors who demonstrated their liberal beliefs were fired from his university.

Another battleground against the liberals has been Russian culture. In the last two years, the heads of most of the important **theaters** and all the most important **museums** have been fired in what appeared to be an effort to prevent the cultural elite from protesting the war—or to pressure them into supporting it.

Against the background of the general defeat of the liberal camp, however, there are still figures who look independent and relatively liberal. One of these is Roman Abramovich, who has been one of the most influential businessmen for more than twenty-five years. Despite his wealth, Abramovich has long shunned publicity, preferring to remain in the shadow of others—be it the late oligarch Boris Berezovsky, Yeltsin's son-in-law Valentin Yumashev, or former head of presidential administration Alexander Voloshin. It was only with the outbreak of war in 2022 that Abramovich began to act openly and on his own behalf, becoming the most active supporter of negotiations between Russia and Ukraine. He was one of the most important mediators at the beginning of the war. Recently, he began to play a role in negotiating the exchange of prisoners and the return of children taken from Ukraine. In essence, Abramovich began his new political career out of desperation. But at the moment, he is probably the only Russian liberal who can call Putin—and whom Putin will listen to.

There is one more person who is not quite a liberal but who now looks like the public leader of that camp—and that, paradoxically, is Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin. Formally, of course, he does not belong to the Yeltsin reformers, but in the 1990s he was governor of the oil-rich region of Tyumen and won several democratic elections, which distinguishes him from all other current politicians.

Sobyanin has always been seen as both a liberal ally and a technocrat. In 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, the federal authorities withdrew and the mayor of Moscow took the initiative—while the other regions obediently introduced the same measures as Moscow. Thus, for several months, the Moscow mayor led Russia's COVID-19 response, while Putin and Kovalchuk hid at Valdai.

When it was all over, it became clear that the Kremlin would not forgive Sobyanin for his independence and efficiency: In authoritarian countries, this is not an achievement but a crime. Then it was decided that Sobyanin would serve his last term and leave. But the war saved him. In the current situation, the last thing the Kremlin wanted was to anger Muscovites, and Sobyanin was again reelected in 2023. He is undeniably a symbol of stability. Despite the war, Moscow is becoming richer and more comfortable, and this is associated exclusively with Sobyanin. In this sense, Sobyanin is a symbol of peaceful life—a man from the past who sort of acts as if there is no war. This automatically makes him the leader of liberals nostalgic for prewar times.

A NEW SYSTEM

For many years, there was such a thing as the "2024 problem" in Russia. It was believed that in 2024, Putin would no longer be eligible for reelection, so he would have to decide on a successor. However, in 2020, at the height of the pandemic, Putin held a referendum to change the constitution and "zeroed" his past presidential terms for the purpose of term limits. That means he is running for a "first" term this month. And legally he can remain president until 2036—when he would be eighty-three years old.

The real problem of 2024, however, has not gone away. Since the invasion of Ukraine, the old political system that was based on cronyism and corruption has become obsolete. Officials speak about a holy war and keeping the country on a war footing, so it seems the Russian state can no longer be built on cynical, corrupt hedonism. It seems like the only true idealists are those Russians who paid tribute to Navalny. They do have values they believe in.

It is true that the most influential people of this regime, Vladimir Putin and Yuri Kovalchuk, are still adherents of the old system based on cynicism and hedonism, while seeming to desire the creation of an Orthodox Christian version of an Iran-style theocracy. But this will not happen easily, because almost no one believes in these values: neither Kiriyenko's young technocrats, nor FSB officers, nor lurking liberals. Moreover, Russian bureaucrats don't believe in anything at all. The last decades have convinced them all that they ought to stop believing in anything. It's safer that way.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mikhail Zygar is a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center. He is a Russian-American journalist, writer, and filmmaker, and the founding editor-in-chief of Russia's only independent news television channel, *Dozhd* (TVRain).

Under Zygar's leadership, *Dozhd* provided an alternative to Kremlin-controlled federal television channels by focusing on news content and giving a platform to opposition voices. The channel's coverage of politically sensitive issues, like the Moscow street protests in 2011 and 2012 as well as the conflict in Ukraine, has been dramatically different from the official coverage by Russia's national television stations. In 2014, Zygar received the CPJ International Press Freedom Award.

Zygar's bestseller *All the Kremlin's Men* (2015) is based on an unprecedented series of interviews with Russian President Vladimir Putin's inner circle, presenting a radically different view of power and politics in Russia. Time named it "one of nine books to understand Russia." His book *The Empire Must Die* (2017) portrays the years leading up to the Russian revolution and the vivid drama of Russia's brief and exotic experiment with civil society before it was swept away by the Communist Revolution. It was named a Kirkus Reviews Best Nonfiction Book of the Year. His latest book, *War and Punishment: Putin, Zelensky, and the Path to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine*, was published in 2023 and was featured on the *New Yorker*'s list of the best books of the year.

In February 2022, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Zygar authored a petition against the invasion cosigned by Russia's most prominent writers, artists, and scholars. In March 2022, he organized the only interview of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy for the independent Russian media.

In 2023, Zygar moved to New York. He's now a press freedom fellow at the City University of New York's Craig Newmark School of Journalism and is a visiting professor at Princeton University's School of Public and International Affairs.

Zygar is openly gay and is married to African-Russian journalist Jean Michel Zygar Shcherbak.

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