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# Introduction

## RUSSIA'S GREAT TRANSFORMATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ITS HYBRID POLITICAL ECONOMY

The collapse of communism transformed the country that Russians live in. A political system dominated by the Communist Party, which penetrated all spheres of state and public life and opposed ideologically the ideals of liberal democracy, was replaced by one that, despite weaknesses in practice, institutionalised political competition and embraced the normative principles of modern democracy. An economic system of central planning under public ownership, designed to destroy the economic foundations of market capitalism, was rejected in favour of a system that permitted economic relations based on private ownership and neo-liberal policies of market reform in many areas. Additionally, the Soviet Union—a country built on transnational institutions and ideas that sought to merge and ultimately eradicate national identities—disappeared and was replaced by a new nation-state, the Russian Federation, based on Russian national identity with significantly diminished borders.

Russian citizens have had to come to terms with these changes in a rapidly changing economic and social environment over the last thirty years. They have contended with periods of economic shock, either domestically induced by 'shock therapy' reforms in the early 1990s (which led to severe impoverishment for many and unprecedented levels of inequality) or by economic crises that were global in nature in 1998 and 2008–9. They have also experienced periods of growth and prosperity in the 2000s, which have resulted in significant economic expansion. Wars have cast a shadow over much of the post-Soviet period,

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too. Military engagement has been ever-present since the Chechen wars of the 1990s through to the Georgia war in 2008 and more recently in Ukraine. This has opened deep questions about the legitimacy of the borders of the Russian state and what it is to be Russian. Moreover, Russian citizens have made sense of these changes while the new system of political and economic power has adapted to the same challenges and opportunities. Although Russian leaders have continued to claim that Russia is a market democracy, the reality of democratic and market development has been limited and has moved in a more statist and authoritarian direction over time. Politics and economics remain tightly fused in a system that has retained hybrid features of both market democracy and statist authoritarianism, but the way in which these features interact has shifted.

At the core of this book is the question of whether the attitudes of citizens have consolidated around support for the hybrid political and economic system that has emerged in Russia, or whether the system remains fundamentally contested. It explores how citizens have come to understand and support the hybrid system of electoral authoritarianism and patrimonial capitalism that emerged to replace the old communist system of total power. We investigate whether system-level contestation shapes policy preferences and party choices, or whether these choices are better explained by the 'normal' contestation that we observe in consolidated systems. Finally, we consider how nation-state building has impacted upon attitudes towards system-level consolidation in the polity and economy. We examine to what extent state expansionism and the war with Ukraine are likely to present challenges to the ways in which citizens view the hybridity of Russia's political economy.

Much attention has been paid in the literature to how best to define the new hybrid orders that have emerged in Russia. Politically, there is widespread agreement that the country failed in the 1990s to establish a functioning democracy and that it then transitioned to become a hybrid electoral authoritarian regime or an electoral autocracy, which combines multi-party elections with authoritarian practices.<sup>1</sup> Economically, scholars have noted that the country also failed to transition to a regulated market economy in the 1990s, in part because reforms were only 'partial', but also because the absence of stable rule of law, corruption, cronyism, and politically motivated state intervention were the norm, particularly after 2000.<sup>2</sup> The interactions of political processes with economic ones in such circumstances have systemic features. As we know from the broader comparative context, electoral authoritarian regimes tend to intervene in the economy by privileging informal relationships over formal market and legal institutions, a condition that has been labelled 'patrimonial capitalism'.<sup>3</sup>

This melding of political and economic systems is evident in the Russian case and is the basis for much of the analysis of Russia's political economy.<sup>4</sup> Scholars have highlighted the importance of informalism and personalistic networks as the main mechanisms for distributing political and economic resources,

characterising Russia's politico-economic system as being based on 'patronal politics'.<sup>5</sup> In slightly different ways, others have referred to politics and the economy based on informal methods of governance as *sistema*, a fused system of political and economic power.<sup>6</sup> Our analysis seeks to build on these insights about the relationship of politics and economics in post-Soviet Russia, especially the idea that these realms became so intertwined as to comprise a single system.

We also highlight a further feature of this system, namely its *normative* as well as its practice-based hybridity. By this we mean not only that Russia's political and economic relations were shaped by controlled but non-trivial competition after they transitioned from chaotic democratic and market competition in the 1990s to an electoral authoritarian and patrimonial capitalist system after Putin became president in 2000, but also that the formal normative bases of the system that emerged from the rejection of the Soviet economic and political order were founded on claims regarding the *legitimacy* of democracy and the market as the foundation of political and economic rule. In practice, of course, this formal legitimization of the values of liberal democracy and the market has been undermined by an administrative regime that has operated on different principles—compatible with the informalism that other scholars have highlighted.<sup>7</sup> Yet, it is this *combination* of the normative bases of the system with the often contradictory practice of politics and the market that in our view constitutes the key feature of hybridity in the Russian system that emerged from the collapsed Soviet order. The fusion of the political and economic systems rests not just on the interpenetration of each by informal practices but is supported by the normative claims that markets and democracy are the legitimating bases of the new order. And it is this form of hybridity that Russian citizens are faced with when considering their attitudes to the new system that emerged over time, and which may be fracturing now.

Our book, then, seeks to analyse how Russians view the hybrid political economy that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the focus on how citizens have supported or opposed the fused political and economic system as whole—normatively democratic and market-based, in practice electoral authoritarian and patrimonial. From the perspective of the citizen, therefore, support for the regime would consist in rejection, on the one hand, of the former communist authoritarian political system and its command economy and the *acceptance ideologically* of democracy and the market. On the other hand, with that acceptance, citizens' support would also mean they endorse the *actual practice* of democracy and the market in Russia, as limited as that might be. Crucially, for our argument, it is the normative and actual character of this hybrid political economy that has had the capacity to generate widespread support among Russian citizens. Moreover, if Russians have endorsed the order that has emerged, then it follows that any move away from hybridity—forward to electoral democracy and the market, or backwards to overt authoritarian

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state control—might also result in the re-emergence of system-level divisions in the country. Indeed, a key finding of the book is that this is precisely what happened when Soviet identity was revitalised by the Russian authorities, with all its authoritarian connotations, after the political crisis of 2011–12 and the start of the conflict with Ukraine in 2014.

### **The Political and Economic Context**

Our analysis of political and economic hybridity is based on public opinion research we conducted from the early 1990s when Russia was transitioning from communism, up to late 2021, when Russia stood on the brink of war with Ukraine. Over this period, successive Russian rulers presided over a political system that combined a normative claim to democracy, including multiparty competition for office, with political practices that restricted competitive democratic politics. They also governed over an economy where a normative commitment to markets based on private property and economic freedom coexisted with practices that undermined the institutions of market economies. Successive leaders have been relatively consistent in their normative claims about democracy and the market. However, the nature of the political and economic practices that shape the reality of Russia's politico-economic system has changed over time, and this provides an important context for interpreting the popular attitudes that we observe.

During the rule of Boris Yeltsin (1990–1999), which is covered by surveys that we conducted in 1993, 1995, 1996 and 1998, politics was competitive. This competition occurred horizontally between political institutions, notably between the executive and the legislature, and vertically between voters and politicians, with regime incumbents defeated in legislative and regional elections on a regular basis.<sup>8</sup> This was a period of flawed and unconsolidated electoral democracy, which lasted through to the end of Vladimir Putin's first presidential term (2000–2004).<sup>9</sup> It was also a time of liberal market reform, with key policies under Yeltsin transforming property ownership and, under Putin, the state's fiscal capacity.<sup>10</sup> However, authoritarian practices also strengthened over this period, giving rise to an emerging hybrid authoritarian political order and political relations that inhibited the development of free market institutions. Yeltsin's 'partial reform' of the economy created an oligarchic class that acquired chunks of Russian industry in return for funds that kept alive a 'virtual economy' operating within the soft budgetary constraints of the old Soviet system; later, Putin would use the same close ties between politics and business to facilitate the reassertion of state power within the economy.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Putin succeeded where Yeltsin had failed in creating an authoritative governing party, United Russia, which provided the political basis for policies aimed at eroding the independence of political institutions and organisations, regional authorities, mass media, and big business.

Over the next decade (2004–2011), which is covered by surveys we conducted in 2003, 2007, and 2009, an electoral authoritarian system was consolidated in Russia, with multi-partyism operating within an electoral environment heavily skewed in the Kremlin's favour. Majorities were achieved by United Russia in successive parliamentary elections (2003 and 2007), and both Vladimir Putin and Dmitrii Medvedev were elected without facing a significant challenge in 2004 and 2008. During this period, policies targeting elections and political parties significantly diminished the horizontal and vertical competition that had characterised politics in the Yeltsin and early Putin periods, and Putin established a regime based on a network of allies that penetrated the political system and economy.<sup>12</sup> As a consequence, state control over the economy grew. Yet, hybridity remained. Notwithstanding their increasingly controlled nature, elections provided openings for opposition parties and led to the first major political crisis of Vladimir Putin's rule in December 2011, when Russian voters protested against fraud in parliamentary elections and Putin's decision to run for the presidency for a third time in 2012.<sup>13</sup> And, although state control of the economy expanded and structural reform slowed, the government continued to stress its commitment to liberal economic policies.

The final period (2012–2021)—analysed on the basis of surveys that we conducted in 2012, 2014, 2018, and 2021—covers the aftermaths of the political crisis of 2011–12 and the global financial crisis of 2008–9. Both crises challenged Russia's hybrid political economy. On the economic front, the government sought to revive growth through so-called national projects: large state-led programmes of development that were introduced with limited effect across a variety of different sectors.<sup>14</sup> In the political realm, despite making some concessions to Putin's opponents in 2012, the regime moved in an even more hegemonic direction, with a host of measures to counter the possibility of future protest.<sup>15</sup> This period also witnessed the increased personalisation of power around Vladimir Putin.<sup>16</sup> It was still possible in this system, as late as 2019, for genuine opposition parties to compete and win in local elections through so-called smart voting, but these opportunities were significantly diminished by 2021.<sup>17</sup> Crucially for our analysis, the Russian regime also sought to reflate its authority by emphasising 'traditional values, nationalism, and paternalism', all of which were given powerful energy by Russian aggression towards Ukraine in 2014 and the annexation of Crimea.<sup>18</sup> These appeals and actions reactivated Soviet identity and in turn reopened divisions around the bases of support for Russia's hybrid political economy.

## The Main Concepts and Argument

In analysing public opinion towards these developments in Russia's political and economic systems, two concepts are core to our investigation: *consolidation* and *contestation*. Consolidation is widely applied to describe many

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established democracies, where democracy has become ‘the only game in town’ for the large majority of elites and citizens.<sup>19</sup> In democratic societies, political and social contestation is common and is embedded in political parties and civil society without undermining the system’s political and economic foundations. In this book we adapt this understanding of consolidation by considering whether Russia’s hybrid system has attained clear majority support among citizens and is absent as a significant basis of contestation in views of policy and political behaviour. If there is any evidence of consolidation, we consider what form *within-system* contestation takes, if it takes place at all.

By focusing on system-level attitudes, our empirical task differs from previous research in several respects. First, we explore the extent to which Russian citizens have accepted the new hybrid political economy. To address this question, we consider whether support or opposition to the system structures policy preferences and party choices. Second, we consider whether Russian citizens instead think about policies and politics in ways we associate with ‘normal’ contestation in democracies—that is by considering the differences in their values, evaluations and experiences, partisan preferences, and socio-economic interests that do not relate to their views of the system as a whole. Finally, we investigate the extent to which support for the system connects to identification with the territorial boundaries of the new Russian state. This latter analysis illuminates an important intervening factor shaping the consolidation of, and contestation between, the attitudes of Russian citizens.

We argue that there is good evidence that the new system showed clear signs of consolidation between 2000 and 2014, by which we mean that Russians started to support the hybrid political economy in significant numbers—that is, they normatively supported markets and democracy as a principle but also supported their actual practice in Russia—and that differences about the system played a limited and declining role in structuring citizens’ policy and partisan preferences. However, conflicts over Russia’s third great system-level change—the formation of a new nation-state, the Russian Federation—powerfully erupted with Russian state expansionism in Ukraine in 2014 and once again sharply divided Russian society about the political, economic, and national systems they supported. Our findings therefore point to deep tensions in Russian society that were present before the full-fledged invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which may have played a role in its launch and which may be further inflamed by the war’s progression.

### **Plan of the Book**

In chapter 1, we introduce the main concepts of the book: the hybrid political economy, consolidation, and contestation. We consider whether the idea of consolidation as applied in a democratic context extends to a system such as



Russia's and others like it. We argue there is no reason a priori to conclude that support for political and economic hybridity may not become 'the only game in town' for citizens in Russia. The absence of system-level contestation, however, does not mean the absence of differences of views of any sort. The chapter also discusses the notion of contestation in a non-democratic environment, while emphasising the need to consider factors specific to the Russian political context, such as distinctive attitudes towards the West, officialdom, the family, and the nation that might divide citizens. We contend that such differences are likely to be connected not only to stable divisions within society but also to changes in the circumstances faced by Russian citizens that have varied over time. We highlight the key events shaping Russian politics throughout the period of analysis, which we seek to leverage through our surveys over time and which we tie to the periods in the development of the hybrid political economy outlined above. The significance of circumstance is central to our main argument about the problem of Russian national identity and 'stateness', and we end the chapter by explaining the ways in which the activation of Soviet identity and nationality politics by the Russian authorities undermined the consolidation of the hybrid political economy by challenging its democratic and market normative foundations.

In chapter 2, we discuss the evolution of research on Russian public opinion since 1991 and the challenges to public opinion research in general and in the Russian context in particular. We also introduce our own data and explain how we use them to operationalise the concepts and predictors analysed in the book.

Chapter 3 engages with the book's core question: How do Russian citizens view the hybrid political economy that emerged in their country? To address this question, we develop a measure that captures the normative and the practice-based features of this post-Soviet Russian order in its various phases. This measure is based on a combination of survey questions asked consistently since 1993, which gauge system-level attitudes towards markets and democracy according to both normative principles and Russian reality. In Russia, rulers have asserted their legitimacy based on claims of support for electoral competition and market practice. On that basis, we focus on three main stances that Russians may adopt in response to the system, and on how levels of support for each of these positions are likely to have been influenced by the changing historical context described earlier. We interpret citizens who are supportive of both ideals and practice to be *system consolidators*, while its opponents are divided between those who are supportive of market and democratic norms in theory but not in practice (*anti-system market democrats*) and those opposed to both (*anti-system statist authoritarians*). Using these measures, we track patterns of consolidation from 1993, finding evidence of growing support for system consolidators during the Putin period until 2014, after which system-level



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consolidation stalled and divisions started to reopen. We also explore the factors predicting different attitudes towards the system.

Chapter 4 explores whether these categories of attitudes towards the system divide public opinion on policy questions—over economic, social, nationality, international, and political rights issues. If consolidation was occurring in Russia, we would expect any divisions over policy to be the result of ‘normal’ contestation—non-system-level values, evaluations and experiences of political and economic performance and socio-economic interests—or even non-contestation, where Russians are undivided in their policy stances. In this analysis, we find that policy-level divides in certain areas appear to track the general pattern of stances regarding the system, declining as system support consolidates but then widening again as divisions re-emerge at the system level. However, in other areas—environmental, social (abortion, the death penalty, same-sex relations), and language policy—system-level divides had little influence at any point, and even ‘normal’ predictors provided limited structure.

Chapter 5 considers the effect of system-level attitudes on voting in parliamentary and presidential elections. We find that there is an absence of strong system-level divisions for much of the period, and that elections therefore have the effect of consolidating support for the hybrid political economy. Throughout most of the 2000s, both the governing party, United Russia, and President Putin maintained the support of most system consolidators *and* even won the votes of high proportions of system opponents of both sorts because the system itself was not electorally contested. Yet, we also find little evidence of ‘normal’ contestation emerging in Russian electoral politics. Those divisions that appeared to influence party support in the 1990s (such as age) weakened over time. Rather, our evidence suggests that elections were effective in *depoliticising* those Russian citizens who voted, with electoral politics at the mass level being largely a matter of non-contestation.

In chapter 6, we extend this analysis by considering whether those many citizens who chose *not to vote* represented a potential basis for system-level contestation. Focusing on citizens who did not vote for both ‘political’ and ‘non-political’ reasons, we find that market democratic opponents of the system were more willing to support protest activity, with statist authoritarian non-voters also more supportive of protest in the later surveys, which is consistent with the reversal of system-level consolidation.

The final empirical chapter (chapter 7) seeks to explain the main puzzle that emerges from the empirical research of the book: Why does the attitudinal consolidation around support for Russia’s hybrid political economy appear to stall and decline after 2012–2014? Contrary to expectations that this might have been caused by failures in what the system delivered economically, we argue that it was the result of identity conflicts surrounding Russia’s third great

transformation: the creation of a new territorial state. The hybrid political economy did not have a ready-made solution to Russia's 'stateness' problem, and when Russia's leaders politicised questions of national identity in the late 2000s by reactivating Soviet identification and expansionist policies (especially towards Ukraine), they reopened divides around the system itself. By reconnecting citizens with authoritarian and anti-market beliefs attached to the Soviet past, identity politics alienated many of those who could support the system *because of its very hybridity* and at the same time galvanised its opponents, both market democrats and fully fledged authoritarians. In this chapter, we support this argument by showing how attitudes towards national identity provide the most consistent predictor of patterns of support for the hybrid political economy; we also discuss the effect they have had on attitudes towards policy and political leadership.

We conclude the book by discussing the impact of the Ukraine war on Russia's hybrid system and its likely influence on system consolidation or contestation.

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