New Russia, Old Rules

Political activism in Russia is a dangerous affair. Whilst Russia may see itself moving forward and achieving success as a post-Soviet state, the methods and strategies it has employed so far are no different to those used during the Soviet era.

9 October marks the start of the appeal trial of Alexei Navalny. The opposition politician and activist, who publicly proclaimed President Vladimir Putin and his party United Russia a "party of crooks and thieves", was convicted by federal authorities of 'serious embezzlement'.

Navalny is only one of several media figures to have clashed with the Kremlin powerhouse. Many before him have sought to expose the failures of a country they once hoped would rise from the ashes as a place of freedom and opportunity. But the wind of change that the collapse of the USSR brought has now soured into an oppressive stench.

Oligarchs' Playpen

In the Nineties, a tiny group of businessmen began to concentrate the wealth that the Soviet heritage had left in their hands, by buying state-owned assets and resources for a fraction of their value. The weak Yeltsin administration was a blessing for them: in 1995, Boris Yeltsin's massive fiscal deficit and need of funds for his re-election made him stage rigged auctions in which the largest state assets were sold to insiders for a pittance. The new class of oligarchs (notably Boris Berezovsky, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, and Roman Abramovich) feared that future governments might reverse the transfer. So they stripped the assets off their newly acquired enterprises, ruining the fledgling upturn of the Russian economy in the process.

Soon the oligarchs began to convert their wealth into power. They were allegedly behind Boris Yeltsin's re-election in 1996, and had significant influence on his decision-making as his advisers and financiers.

For them, backing the succession of Vladimir Putin as president in 2000 seemed a means to cement their power. However, this turned out to be a serious mistake.

Putin's Path to Power

Vladimir Putin entered politics in 1991, working his way up to Yeltsin's presidential staff. Groomed by Yeltsin as his successor, it was around this time that he became head of FSB, the successor of KGB. Initially highly loyal to Yeltsin, he became Prime Minister in 1999.

Putin's star was rising as Yeltsin's was waning. His tough 'law and order' image and hardliner attitude regarding Chechen conflict received substantial support, and funding from the oligarchy, who were moving from the ailing Yeltsin onto this vibrant new candidate.

Therefore they did not bat an eyelid when, in the same year, Boris Yeltsin abruptly announced his resignation. The stage was set for Putin, and in 2000 he became President.

His first decree was immunity for Yeltsin from corruption allegations. His next move shocked his wealthy supporters as he began to curb their power and influence within the government. Through the pretext of reform, Putin aimed to disempower any potential rivals.

There were challengers amongst the outraged oligarchy. Boris Berezovsky led a campaign against Putin in 2000. This turned against him, as Putin swiftly initiated the nationalization of private TV networks, citing unfair criticism in an oligarch-controlled media.

Mikhail Khodorkovsky, former head of Siberian oil company Yukos, publicly accused major government members of corruption. For this act of 'treason', he was jailed on charges of tax evasion, and had most of his assets seized by the government. In fact, most privatized companies began to be re-nationalised, boosting state capitalism.

Putin's second presidential term in 2004 saw increases in control over federal subjects of Russia,

enforced by ostensible anti-terror laws in the aftermath of Beslan School Hostage Crisis. Even a return to his Prime Minister position in 2008 (constitutionally barred from more than two consecutive presidencies) had him exert his power no less through Dmitriy Medvedev. By 2012, despite allegations of electoral fraud, he was back as President.

Stifling Dissent: The State of Censorship

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These days, Putin's power is more absolute than ever. There is very little diversity in Russia's media: most major outlets are either owned by the state, or by an oligarch with links to the state. For example: NTV, a channel once critical of Putin's government, is now owned by state-controlled Gazprom. Two other popular stations, Channel One and RTR have also been taken over by the state. Editors who resist government intrusion are often fired, and many independent online publications are slowly being taken offline. A notable case is the liberal opposition newspaper Novaya Gazeta. Not only were four journalists murdered, but the newspaper underwent several superfluous libel cases and numerous Denial of Service attacks online in the Kremlin's bid to silence a voice of dissent.

Increased ties with the Orthodox Church in exchange for electoral support led to the passing of strict anti-blasphemy, anti-LGBT and anti-'extremist' legislation, where criticism towards the state already counts as 'extremist'. The world has witnessed the tenuous anti-blasphemy laws play out with the arrest and imprisonment of Pussy Riot.

Russia may currently host American whistleblower Edward Snowden, yet it intimidates and destroys its own whistleblowers, as further described in the case of Sergei Magnitsky. A form of internet censorship exists under the guise of "blocking content that may be harmful to children", which has been used to silence LGBT activists.

Since 1992, 54 reporters have been killed whilst researching for corruption stories. Often their murders were insufficiently investigated. Those who have yet to be targeted in this way are controlled by strict defamation laws, often prosecuted under high treason charges.

The following five cases are examples of how far Putin's Russia is willing to go in order to stifle the criticism of its people.

Anna Politkovskaya

Anna Politkovskaya was a journalist who wrote scathing reportage focusing on the conflicts in Chechnya. Her aim was to expose human rights abuses, particularly under Vladimir Putin's regime. Starting out at Soviet newspaper Izvestiya, she joined Novaya Gazeta in 1999. A vocal critic of the Kremlin, in the following years of her career she was the subject of numerous death threats.

In October 2002, she risked her life to enter the Moscow theatre that Chechen militants had seized along with hundreds of hostages, in an attempt to negotiate.

She tried to do the same in 2004 with the Beslan school siege. However, she became severely ill during her flight there, leading to suspicions that she had been deliberately poisoned. Despite mounting attempts on her life she continued to pursue her reportage until October 2006.

In what was believed to be a state-funded assassination, Politkovskaya was gunned down in the lift of her apartment block in central Moscow. In the following week, dissenter Alexander Litvinenko said he possessed evidence that Putin's regime ordered the assassination.

Two weeks later, he was dead.

Alexander Litvinenko

Alexander Litvinenko rose in the ranks of what was then KGB as a lieutenant-colonel, but became increasingly disillusioned with the internal machinations of Vladimir Putin, his boss at the time.

After holding a notorious conference revealing a catalogue of cases where public officials had abused their power, Litvinenko fled to Britain in 2000 and was granted asylum. Protected by his expatriate status and initially funded by Boris Berezovsky, he continued aiming his criticism towards the Kremlin.

Until November 2006, Litvinenko had been investigating the recent death of Anna Politkovskaya. In addition, he claimed to possess information which alleged that the bombings of apartment blocks in Moscow and two other cities in 1999 were not the work of Chechen separatists – as officially stated – but FSB agents.

In November, Litvinenko went to drink tea with two former agents, one of them Andrei Lugovoi. Within hours Litvinenko fell ill and after days of agony, he died of a fatal dose of polonium. Lugovoi escaped back to Russia and has, despite denying any wrongdoing, refused to be extradited to Britain for a trial.

Galina Starovoytova

Whilst Putin was still head of FSB, another vocal opponent emerged. Galina Starovoytova, who started out as an ethnographer, began her political career in 1989 and was spokesperson for Boris Yeltsin during his presidential campaign of 1991. Advising mainly on inter-ethnic issues, she strongly opposed the increasing omnipresence of Russian security services, and supported lustration (the exclusion of former communist officials from positions of power).

In 1998 she became the leader of the Democratic Russia party and began preparations for the State Duma elections. One of her stated goals was to curb the power of FSB.

A month before the elections, she was gunned down in the entryway of her apartment in St. Petersburg.

Natalia Estemirova

On 15 July 2009, human rights defender Natalia Estemirova was abducted and murdered by unidentified assailants in Grozny, Chechnya's capital. A friend and colleague of Anna Politkovskaya, she was a prolific reporter of human rights abuses, particularly of pro-Kremlin Chechnyan president Ramzan Kadyrov.

Sergei Magnitsky

High-profile assassinations are not confined to activists, journalists and former agents. Sergei Magnitsky was working as a tax auditor at a Moscow firm when he discovered a massive fraud scheme that saw Russian tax officials and police officers net in an amount of $230 million. Hoping to do the right thing, he reported it to authorities. However, he was instead detained on suspicion of aiding tax evasion and placed in the notorious Butyrka prison to await trial. Seven days before the maximum period of one year for which one can be held in Russia without a trial, he died from untreated pancreatitis, allegedly exacerbated by torture and beatings.

Official investigations were lacklustre. One prison doctor was charged with manslaughter, but the charges were dropped.

In 2011, the Human Rights Council noted that it was the same people Magnitsky had accused of mass corruption that were investigating his case.

The impact of Magnitsky's death created tension in Russian-American relations. In 2012, the US Congress adopted the Magnitsky Act, allowing the US to refuse visas and freeze financial assets of Russian officials who were suspected of involvement in human rights violations. In retaliation, Russia denied American families the right to adopt Russian orphans.

Raising Russia

Russia has been making serious progress in recovering its global standing. As the largest country in the world by area, with the fifth largest economy thanks to its vast reserves of minerals, oil and

natural gas, Russia had the resources to weather the aftermath of the US financial crisis.

Its military power is also vast: the largest stockpile of nuclear weapons worldwide, third in military spending, the only strategic bomber force apart from the US.

Putin is also said to be working on establishing a Eurasian Union in what may be a veiled attempt at reintroducing Soviet-style Russian domination. Though the USA has expressed its disapproval over the scheme, their attempts to hinder the union will hardly impress Putin. As recent events in Syria have shown, Putin no longer considers the US a serious contender in world politics, and focuses on good relations with other superpowers such as China.

The most disturbing aspect of this rise is the ruthless way in which the Kremlin dispatches its critics. Whilst Russia may see itself move forward and achieve success as a post-Soviet state, the methods and strategies it has employed so far are no different to what has been done during the failed Soviet union.

Yet the methods may get fiercer. Putin may get re-elected for a fourth term, but after that he would be forced to step down, according to the constitution. Medvedev may have been the ideal seat-warmer for Putin, but this would be difficult to replicate with a second candidate whose loyalty might be bought by someone just as ruthless. Putin's own history is his reminder – hence his fight to stay in power for as long as possible.

But weathering another rigged election for the fourth time would be a push too far.

The world has already seen what consistent citizen dissent can do, as in the case of the Arab Springs. There are only so many protesters Putin's government can jail, only so many journalists he can silence before the line is crossed.