
Myth 15

'It's all about Putin – Russia is a manually run, centralized autocracy'

Vladimir Putin's Russia is not a one-man show. To understand how governance actually works in the country, we need to take into account the power and complexity of the bureaucracy – which will only continue to grow in importance.

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What is the myth?

It is tempting to believe that Vladimir Putin makes all important decisions in Russia on his own; that politicians and bureaucrats then execute Putin's commands without fail in a system known as the 'power vertical'; and that political institutions, such as the national-level legislature as well as regional authorities, serve merely to implement Putin's wishes. This myth relates, therefore, to how Russian decision-making is understood, to the implementation of decisions in Russia, and to the nature of the country's political institutions.

Putin's 'Direct Line' – an annual televised question-and-answer session during which the president hears from, and responds to, the problems of Russians across the country – combines all three elements of the myth. Putin appears to make decisions alone and on the spot to solve callers' woes. He instructs officials to carry out these orders. And he engages directly with citizens, without the need for mediating institutions such as political parties or parliament.

To the extent that it reinforces misperceptions of Russia, this 'all-powerful Putin' myth can be framed in two ways. The 'positive' version – Putin as the 'good tsar' – suggests strong and competent leadership. In effect, the myth makes Putin appear a more potent and unconstrained political force than is the case in reality. The 'negative' version of the myth, no less detrimental to a realistic understanding of Russian politics, highlights the pathologies of personalized decision-making and thus supports cartoonish Putin-as-dictator characterizations in the West.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ As a sign of this duality, an article in *The Economist* noted: 'Both liberal reformers and conservative traditionalists in Moscow are talking about Mr Putin as a 21st-century tsar.' *The Economist* (2017), 'A tsar is born', 28 October 2017, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2017/10/26/a-tsar-is-born> (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).

Who advocates or subscribes to it?

Respected analysts, state officials and journalists have made statements that conform to the myth. According to Fiona Hill, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and the former senior director for Europe and Russia on the US National Security Council: ‘Putin’s Russia is a one-man show. [...] In the end, he makes the decisions.’¹⁹⁰ According to three *New Yorker* writers: ‘Every aspect of the country’s political life, including the media, was brought under the “vertical of power” that he [Putin] constructed.’¹⁹¹ And according to Gregory Feiffer, a former Moscow correspondent for the US’s National Public Radio (NPR): ‘In Putin’s first year as president, parliament became nothing more than a place for legislatures [sic] to rubber stamp Putin’s policies.’¹⁹²

Why is it wrong?

The myth exaggerates the degree of personal control exercised by the president. It glosses over key factors such as the meaningful roles of collective bodies, managerial incompetence and the self-interested behaviour of people beyond Putin. All these factors are vital to understanding how governance actually works in Russia today.

On decision-making, to focus purely on Putin would be to ignore the important roles played by other organizations and actors, including the Presidential Administration, the Security Council and the government. According to an insider in the first of these: ‘All of [the Kremlin’s] decisions on serious issues are collegial and coordinated. The final decision is up to the president, but the agreed upon point of view goes to him for approval.’¹⁹³ Even if this characterization goes too far in the other direction, a picture of Putin dictating policy alone misses the crucial ways in which other actors frame problems, channel information, battle over details, develop positions and set the agenda for Putin to review.¹⁹⁴ Even if Putin were to single-handedly decide everything (which he does not), the agenda-setting power of the bureaucracy to shape which issues reach the leader’s desk would still be crucial. Although Putin may have the *ability* to intervene in all types of decision-making, that does not mean that he always does or wants to. And, on occasion, his direct intervention as a judge between competing positions is not enough to settle a policy decision.¹⁹⁵

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¹⁹⁰ Hill, F. (2016), ‘Putin: The one-man show the West doesn’t understand’, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 72(3): 140–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2016.1170361> (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).

¹⁹¹ Osnos, E., Yaffa, J. and Remnick, D. (2017), ‘Trump, Putin, and the New Cold War’, *New Yorker*, 6 March 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/06/trump-putin-and-the-new-cold-war> (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).

¹⁹² Feiffer, G. (2008), ‘Putin’s Eight Years in Power Leave Dubious Legacy’, NPR, 6 May 2008, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/90134100?t=1610450452380> (accessed 16 Feb. 2021). Instead of ‘legislatures’, ‘legislators’ would be a more appropriate term.

¹⁹³ Anonymous source in the Presidential Administration – quoted in Pertsev, A. (2020), ‘Powerful, but not omnipotent’, *Meduza*, 3 November 2020, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/11/03/powerful-but-not-omnipotent> (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).

¹⁹⁴ According to a report by the Dossier Center, for example, Putin ‘increasingly relies on information from the FSB [Federal Security Service]’ (p. 3), thereby increasing the agenda-setting power of this state body. Dossier Center (2020), *Lubyanka federation: How the FSB determines the politics and economics of Russia*, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/FSB-Report-Printed-Final.pdf> (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).

¹⁹⁵ Noble, B. (2018), ‘Authoritarian Amendments: Legislative Institutions as Intra-Executive Constraints in Post-Soviet Russia’, *Comparative Political Studies*, 53(9), pp. 1417–54. See the discussion about the ‘budget rule’ (pp. 1428–32).

On decision implementation, the surprising fact is that presidential orders are frequently *not* fulfilled. A review ordered in 2020 by Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin into the implementation of presidential ‘assignments’ (*porucheniia*) by deputy prime ministers, ministers and department officials revealed widespread non-implementation within specified timeframes.¹⁹⁶ The Ministry of Finance, for example, failed to complete 73 per cent of its presidential assignments on time. More importantly, non-implementation has also been a feature of certain high-profile policy objectives, such as the ‘May Decrees’ and ‘National Projects’ – spending promises and development goals set by Putin – with aims abandoned or deadlines kicked further into the future.¹⁹⁷ It is likely that this non-implementation does not reflect brazen defiance of Putin, but it does show how the mere fact of an order coming from the president does not ensure its swift execution.

On political institutions in general, Putin markedly weakened institutional centres of political power beyond the Kremlin following his election to the presidency in 2000. But that does not mean that all political institutions are simply shams. Take the federal-level parliament, the Federal Assembly. Although the legislature is very much subservient to the president, presidential initiatives make up only a minority of the assembly’s agenda. And the lower chamber – the State Duma – shows much less deference to government ministers, particularly under the speakership of Vyacheslav Volodin, a former senior Kremlin official. In addition, the parliamentary phase of law-making can provide a window onto disagreements within the executive – something that shows the insufficiency both of accounts claiming that the legislature is simply a ‘rubber stamp’ and of suggestions that executive actors’ preferences are dictated by, or perfectly align with, those of Putin.¹⁹⁸

What is its impact on policy?

A fixation on Putin leads to at least three problems: 1) an obsession with Putin’s thinking at the expense of attention to other factors; 2) a narrative of Putin’s almost unique power, which suits the Kremlin; and 3) a difficulty in combining complexity with critique.

Looking at the first of these problems, too much time can be – and has been – spent on trying to work out what Putin thinks or ‘really believes’ concerning certain issues. The hope appears to be that knowledge of Putin’s inner thoughts will act as the key to understanding and anticipating policy decisions. But this approach is often not sensible. It can easily descend into rank guesswork and reading too much into Kremlin gossip, which may often be disinformation. More importantly, it is likely that Putin does not have settled views – never

¹⁹⁶ Pashkovskaia, E. (2020), ‘«Двоечники» Мишустина. Кто из министров чаще всего «забывает» на поручения президента’ [Mishustin’s “delinquents”. Which ministers most often “blow off” presidential assignments], *Baza*, 3 November 2020, <https://baza.io/posts/139fdeb5-89db-436c-854f-fd8320fe14aa> (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).

¹⁹⁷ bne IntelliNews (2020), ‘Russia’s Putin sets new 2030 goals as National Projects scaled back’, 22 July 2020, <https://www.intellinews.com/russia-s-putin-sets-new-2030-goals-as-national-projects-scaled-back-187975> (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).

¹⁹⁸ Noble, B. and Schulmann, E. (2018), ‘Not Just a Rubber Stamp: Parliament and Lawmaking’, in Treisman, D. (ed.) (2018), *The New Autocracy: Information, Politics, and Policy in Putin’s Russia*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

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mind personal preferences – on a range of policy issues. Putin often acts as an arbiter on policy decisions, making it more fruitful to analyse the nature and sources of these rival viewpoints. In addition, by focusing on Putin as an individual, observers can all too easily ignore the structural conditions that help shape his thinking. These conditions may well remain unchanged in a post-Putin world and, therefore, will likely also influence his successor.

Secondly, sustaining the myth plays into the Kremlin's hands. Projecting an image of Putin's strength helps the Kremlin's information goal of portraying the president as untouchably powerful – something that, conceivably, encourages emulation in other non-democratic states.¹⁹⁹ When it occurs, the use of 'manual control' by Putin is better seen as a sign of systemic malfunction rather than primarily as evidence of his presidential power. And these moments – on display during the 'Direct Line' broadcasts – are largely pieces of set political theatre rather than actual decision-making.²⁰⁰

The third problem with making it all about Putin is that this encourages black-and-white thinking. If all decisions, particularly those criticized by foreign governments, are assumed to come from Putin directly, then that may provide reassuring simplicity. But it also means that attempts to push back against this approach – to provide nuance and show the many shades of grey in Russia's governance processes – can be seen incorrectly as efforts to let Putin off the hook. Acknowledging complexity is not, however, a sign of condonement or complicity.

What would good policy look like?

Good policy should begin by acknowledging the role of people beyond Putin in decision-making; by acknowledging the frustrations he faces in realizing his goals; and by acknowledging the very real roles played by political institutions, even if not conforming to the norms of democratic governance.

Good policy should recognize quite how much can be learned about Russian politics by examining the public statements of individuals in official positions. True, these sources will not provide the full picture. But dismissing them as merely a veneer perpetuates the idea that 'mysterious, enigmatic' Russia can only be discovered in the shadows. That is simply wrong. Yes, there are influential individuals without official posts, deployed to carry out tasks that require plausible deniability of state involvement, but the majority of key players map onto formal structures of power.

Likewise, the documents produced by official bodies should be taken more seriously. Publicly accessible documents relating to the law-making process, for example, reveal a rich picture of the reality of governance, including inter-factional rivalry and bureaucratic incompetence. Much more realistic predictions of state policy can be made from the draft annual state budgets and amendments

¹⁹⁹ This point is also noted in Hill (2016), 'Putin: The one-man show the West doesn't understand', p. 141: 'Overestimating him [Putin] can be as dangerous as underestimating him.'

²⁰⁰ RIA Novosti (2019), 'Итоги «прямых линий» Владимира Путина' [Results of Vladimir Putin's "Direct Lines"], 20 June 2019, <https://ria.ru/20190620/1555662941.html> (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).

that go through the Duma than from the latest rumours about intra-Kremlin factional conflicts. Analysing these materials requires knowledge and skills. Good policy in the future will likely, therefore, be dependent on Western societies investing in a larger corpus of Russia analysts across a broader range of areas.

Not only does looking beyond Putin make sense in understanding current governance, it also makes sense when thinking about post-Putin politics. Although Putin now has the constitutional option to remain president until 2036, generational change is inevitable, making a focus on younger, second-tier officials crucial. In addition, the COVID-19 crisis has made manifestly clear the key roles that regional elites have played, and are likely to keep playing, in important decisions. This has been evident in relations between the Kremlin and the Moscow city government during the pandemic, constituting a line of tension that could well prove increasingly consequential. Such a dynamic would have been completely missed or misinterpreted by those analysts who overestimate the degree to which Russia is centralized, with the result that policymakers would have been blind to a likely source of important developments in the near future.

There is a reason why this myth exists. Putin is powerful. Cheerleaders and critics alike focus on cases that provide especially potent demonstrations of his power. The resulting general image is of a fundamentally personalist system in which little else matters beyond him. But Putin is not ‘a cross between Joseph Stalin and a Bond movie villain’²⁰¹ sitting atop a ‘well-oiled machine’²⁰² of state governance. He does not simply dictate policy, particularly in those areas outside of his personal interest.²⁰³ If policymakers ignore the limits to Putin’s power, as well as the many other actors who enable him (and constrain him, however obliquely), they will create policy in response to a caricature, not a complex country.²⁰⁴

201 Galeotti, M. (2021), ‘No One Benefits From Renewed Demonizing of Russia’, *Moscow Times*, 14 January 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/01/14/no-one-benefits-from-renewed-demonizing-of-russia-a72606> (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).

202 Gorokhovskaia, Y. (2020), ‘It may seem Putin controls the Russian state personally. The reality is more dangerous’, *Guardian*, 25 August 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/aug/25/alexei-navalny-putin-russian-activist-russia> (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).

203 Ananyev, M. (2018), ‘Inside the Kremlin: The Presidency and Executive Branch’, in Treisman, D. (ed.) (2018), *The New Autocracy: Information, Politics, and Policy in Putin’s Russia*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

204 Greene, S. and Robertson, G. (2019), *Putin v. the People: The Perilous Politics of a Divided Russia*, New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press.