



Guest Editors' Corner

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In These Pages

Welcome to the special summer issue of *Orbis*, dedicated to examining the consequences of 20 years of Vladimir Putin's time in power as the Russian Federation's ruler. May 2020 marked the two-decade anniversary of Putin's ascension to power as the leader of Russia, making him the longest-serving Russian leader since Joseph Stalin. As Russia enters the third decade of the Putin system, political and economic stagnation loom large. Once the guarantor of Russia's economic prosperity and international fame, Putin's Kremlin now seems stale, devoid of new ideas or new faces. In foreign policy, Russia is hyperactive on the world stage, but is isolated from the West and faces ongoing sanctions. COVID-19 poses a new set of problems that the Kremlin will struggle to address.

While polls suggest that Russian voters are ready for change, Putin has no plans to leave. He is

currently in the process of amending the Russian constitution to reset presidential term limits, allowing him to remain in power until 2036. Further clamping down on freedom of speech and dissent will make the Kremlin think that it has more control over politics, but it also heightens the likelihood that Russia's leaders misread the risks to their political future. In his essay on the future of Putin's presidency, Bill Spiegelberger examines the constitutional amendments and argues that they will change little. Spiegelberger concludes, "The amendments are neither a cure for the regime, nor a palliative for those living under it, but a placebo placating those happy with things just the way they are."

In his 20 years in power, Putin has employed a set of social policies to bolster his popularity. But these policies have failed to address Russia's chronic under-provision of health-care, education, and other social

services, particularly in rural areas. In her essay, Sarah Wilson Sokhey argues that the COVID-19 global pandemic will only exacerbate Russia's social policy challenges and could pose a threat to Putin's popularity—and his regime's survival.

Another major factor of regime stability over the past two decades has been Russia's natural resource wealth. Anna Mikulska discusses the role of natural gas in Russian foreign policy and domestic politics. The global gas industry faces a period of rapid change, and Gazprom's dominant position in its main market, Europe, is under threat.

When it comes to foreign policy, Central Asia is crucial to Russia's geo-strategic interests. But Russia now must reckon with a rising China. Both powers are pushing new integration schemes, via the Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road Initiative. Central Asia's next generation must forge new economies that provide jobs beyond oil and gas, argues Max Hess. If they fail, they risk destabilizing the region, and neighbors such as Russia, too.

Soon after his arrival as the head of Russia, Putin revived the longstanding historical narratives of Russia as a besieged fortress, surrounded by Western enemies, argues Anna Borshchevskaya. The Kremlin has cultivated militant and anti-Western patriotism, Soviet nostalgia, and religious Orthodoxy to bolster its popularity. The growing role of the military and security services—and militarism as an ideology—has

therefore been crucial in Russian domestic politics, Borshchevskaya contends, warning that militarism as a national idea and a unifying vision will shape Russia's politics for years to come.

Across the United States and Europe, and increasingly in Africa and Asia, concern about Russian domestic political interference is growing. In his essay, Chris Miller explores the history of concern over interference. Examining Anglo-Russian relations at a period of crisis in the 1870s, Miller shows that the issue of interference and political subversion is far from new.

Another key frontier in Russia's foreign policy under Putin's leadership is Asia. Over the last 20 years, Russia has voiced a desire to embrace its Asian potential. Harnessing the economic advancement of the Asia-Pacific for the development of Siberia and the Russian Far East is an aim of Moscow's pivot to Asia. Maria Shagina explains how, since the onset of the Ukraine crisis, Russia intensified its engagement with Asia, marking a qualitative shift in its relations with China.

In the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, many analysts predicted that the Baltic states were Putin's next target. Una Bergmane examines the increased NATO presence in the region, Baltic energy security, and the unique nature of Baltic Russian-speaking communities to explain why predictions of insecurity in the Baltics

have proven false. Meanwhile, Indra Ekmanis addresses this question from a different angle, exploring civic and cultural integration among Russian speakers in Latvia.

In our *In Review* section, Paul Heer reviews Daniel S. Markey's, *China's Western Horizon: Beijing and the New Geopolitics of Eurasia*. And finally, Robert Hamilton offers several book recommendations and engages in a roundtable conversation with Thomas Shattuck, discussing major shifts in U.S.-Russia relations: the death of arms control treaties and the beginning of a third era of Putinism.

The question of the next decade of the Putin system—if it lasts a decade—animates all the essays in this *Orbis* special issue, exploring what historical trends are likely to persist, and where pressure for change is building. One of the greatest dangers in predicting the future is assuming that current trends will develop in a linear fashion. Putin has made himself seem like an irreplaceable fixture of Russian politics. No doubt that is how Tsar Nicholas II viewed himself in early 1917, or how Mikhail Gorbachev felt in the late 1980s. We leave it to the reader to decide whether Putin's constitutional reform is priming him for an additional decade in power or is preparing the way for a new political shock.

