

The New Kremlinology: Understanding Regime Personalisation in Russia

In the post-Cold War period, many previously democratising countries experienced authoritarian reversals whereby incumbent leaders took over and gravitated towards personalist rule. Scholars have predominantly focused on the authoritarian turn, as opposed to the type of authoritarian rule emerging from it. In a departure from accounts centred on the failure of democratisation in Russia, this book's argument begins from a basic assumption that the political regime of Vladimir Putin is a personalist regime in the making. How do regimes turn personalist? How do their rulers acquire and maintain personal control? Focusing on the politics within the Russian ruling coalition since 1999, *The New Kremlinology* explains the process of regime personalisation, that is, the acquisition of personal power by a political leader. The investigation is based on four components of regime personalisation: patronage networks, deinstitutionalisation, media personalisation, and establishing permanency in office. Drawing from comparative evidence and theories of personalist rule, the book explains how Putin's patron-client network became dominant and how, subsequently, the Russian ruler elevated himself above his own ruling coalition. The lessons of the book extend beyond Russia and illuminate how other personalist regimes emerge and develop. Furthermore, the title of the book, *The New Kremlinology*, is chosen to emphasise not only the subject matter, the *what*, but also the *how* — the battery of innovative methods employed to study the black box of non-democratic politics.

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Q: What are you going to do after you depart from the presidency? A: How can I have plans after death? You're just like children, really.

One and the same person cannot hold the office of the President for more than two lives in a row (Constitution, art. 81).

If you could not ask Putin your question yesterday [at the annual Q&A show], do not worry. You still have your whole life ahead of you.

Russian *anekdoty* (jokes)

Introduction to *The New Kremlinology*

“If there’s Putin—there’s Russia, if there’s no Putin—there’s no Russia.” In what was to become a widely disseminated, discussed and ridiculed phrase in 2014, Vyachaslav Volodin, then deputy chief of the presidential administration of the Russian Federation, thus equated Russia with the identity of its political leader.¹ It is tempting to dismiss these words as merely an ingratiating attempt by a courtier who missed the chilling resemblance of his wording to a notorious Nazi slogan “*Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Führer*”, which equally underlined the unity between leader and people. However, we cannot help but think that it was also a very perceptive comment about the nature of the political regime developing in Russia at the time. Examples of personalist leaders in history who expressed, or had similar sentiments expressed on their behalf, abound. Arguably, one of the well-known historical equivalents of “If there’s Leader—there’s Country” “maxim” belongs to François Duvalier (1957–71) who himself declared that he was the Haitian Flag (“je suis le Drapeau Haitien”) (see Heintz and Heintz 1978, 585).

Our argument begins from a basic assumption that the political regime of Vladimir Putin is a personalist regime in the making. In a departure from accounts centred on the failure of democratisation in Russia, we believe that we can improve our understanding of Russian politics by building on theories of personalist rule. We argue that important developments in Russian politics can be better explained by the process of regime personalisation—related to, but conceptually distinct from, that of democratic breakdown. Focusing on the politics within the Russian ruling coalition from 1999, *The New Kremlinology*

¹Volodin is quoted in <http://itar-tass.com/politika/1525655>. Accessed 1 December, 2014.

explains the process of regime personalisation, or personal power acquisition by a political leader. The title we chose emphasises not only our focus on leadership politics in Russia but also the reliance on new approaches to study the opaque politics in the Kremlin.

Instead of comparing regimes that have already become personalist, we chart the development of personalism—henceforth, we refer to personalist regime and personalism interchangeably—in Russia. We study how it acquires many personalist characteristics but may still fall short of what we have in mind when we think of a “typical” personalist regime. A detailed examination of regime personalisation in Russia—a “middle-of-the-road” regime with some but not all attributes of personalism—will improve our understanding of how other personalist regimes emerge and function. The argument is centred on elite management and the relationship between the ruler and ruling coalition over time. Specifically, we study the process of personalisation by studying patronage networks, deinstitutionalisation, and the use of rhetoric in elite management.

Following the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, a number of Western countries imposed sanctions on Russian officials, entities, and designated “members of the Russian leadership’s inner circle.”² One of the goals behind sanctions was presumably to change the calculus of key members of the Russian elite who in turn would be able to influence the Russian president. Indeed, personalist regimes can be sensitive to loss of revenue because they need to fund patronage (Escriba-Folch and Wright 2010). One informed observer of Russian politics dismissed such calculations however, arguing that “nobody will speak out because of the implicit threat of retribution.”³ Likewise, one of the sanctioned billionaires, Gennady Timchenko, equally ruled out categorically that sanctioned businessmen would even think of influencing the president: “It is out of the question. Vladimir Vladimirovich is always driven by Russia’s interests in any situation. Full stop. There can be no compromise here. We would not even think of arguing about it.”⁴ The logic behind sanctions is seemingly based on the assumption that in 2014, Russia resembled the type of political regime commonly referred

²See U.S. Department of the Treasury, 20 March 2014, “Treasury Sanctions Russian Officials, Members Of The Russian Leadership’s Inner Circle, And An Entity For Involvement In The Situation In Ukraine” at <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/j123331.aspx>.

³Bloomberg, 21 July 2014, “Russian Billionaires in ‘Horror’ as Putin Risks Isolation”, available at <http://www.bloomberg.com/archive/news/2014-07-21/>.

⁴See ITAR-TASS, 4 August 2014, “Timchenko: Everything has to be paid for, and acquaintance with top officials as well.”<http://itar-tass.com/opinions/top-officials/1353227>. All three accessed 16 September 2015.

to as personalist, where “access to office and the fruits of office depends much more on the discretion of an individual leader” (Geddes 1999, 121).

The annexation of the Crimea and the advent and escalation of conflict in Eastern Ukraine in 2014—a turn in Russia’s foreign policy implemented without any apparent disagreement among its ruling coalition members or, seemingly, even their prior knowledge of such plans—testifies to the increasingly personalised nature of the Russian regime. It is not entirely clear, however, at what stage from 1999 the regime became personalist, or if it did. Was this tendency present from the very beginning, during the second term, or in the 2008–12 period when the ruler departed from the presidency yet remained supreme as the “national leader”? Or can we talk in earnest about personalism in Russia after September 2011 when the ruler declared his intention to remain in power effectively, permanently, or only following annexation of the Crimea in 2014?

In a personalist regime the power belongs to a single individual who is unrivalled in terms of personal influence and control. Think of paradigmatic cases of personalist leaders such as “The Conqueror of the British Empire,” Idi Amin of Uganda (Kirk-Greene 1991, 179), Muammar Gaddafi of Libya or the above mentioned François Duvalier of Haiti. Clearly, the Russian strongman foreign policy notwithstanding, in terms of domestic institutions and policies Putin is no Gaddafi, the Brother Leader (Viorst 1999, 69), nor is he François Duvalier—“chosen by Christ” (Nicholls 1970, 414), nor, at least until his return to the Kremlin in 2012, is he someone like Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus (Feduta 2005). The above mentioned leaders have groomed their own relatives for succession, may have developed their own personality cults, and some, such as Gaddafi, have become so preeminent in politics that they require no official post whatsoever to remain undisputed leader (Hinnebusch 1984). The regime of Vladimir Putin is different. Does it render the Russian political regime *not* personalist?

As we explain in detail throughout this book, the contemporary Russian regime features some, but not all, of the characteristics associated with a personalist regime: it is personalist in the making. Personalist regimes, as well as those undergoing personalisation, vary. Paraphrasing Geddes (1999, 121)’s influential observation that “different kinds of authoritarianism differ from each other as much as they differ from democracy,” we can similarly warn that different kinds of personalist regimes differ from one another as much as they differ from other non-democratic regimes. There are contemporaneous differences arising from different stages of development of such regimes, and varia-

tions in idiosyncratic historical circumstances. This book studies the process of regime personalisation. How do personalist rulers acquire and maintain personal control? The acquisition of personal power, what we refer to as regime personalisation, is a process. Such a process may be prolonged or speedy: an aspiring personalist leader may take considerable time in this transformation or he—it is always a man as far as regime personalisation is concerned—may emerge suddenly dominant, often literally overnight after a purge of powerful rivals. The process of personalisation may also be reversed, aborted, or continue within an already existing personalist regime, when it becomes even more strongly personalist.

Non-democratic regimes also differ in terms of the degree of their personalisation and the strength of the ruler's personal pre-eminence. Regime personalisation is therefore not only a process but also a dimension of non-democratic politics. There exist both weak and strong personalist regimes. Regimes also exist that combine the elements of personal rule with the presence of dominant parties or military involvement in politics (Geddes 1999). The Russian regime is better understood not as an ideal type, that is, a completed personalist regime, but as one in the process of personalisation. The process may still transform the country into a full-blown personalist regime—despite the apparent reluctance of Vladimir Putin himself to commit to such a journey, as we discuss throughout the book. Or Russia may continue to muddle through as a “halfway” personalist regime.

Because we assume the dynamic, changing and multifaceted nature of political processes, we are able to reconcile the existence of “non-personalist” aspects of Russian politics with the presence of strong personalistic elements. The presence of a dominant party and prevailing “stability of cadres” policy shows reluctance to constantly reshuffle and replace political elites—one of the typical attributes of personalism—while this coincides with the personal dominance of the president over institutions and the pervasive influence of patron-client networks—a typical personalist attribute. In other words, we account for the multidimensionality of personalism. Specifically, we study how the ruler acquires and maintains personal power by relying on patronage networks for governance, particularly in the early and middle stages of personalisation, on regime deinstitutionalisation, and personal dominance in the media. The book explains how Vladimir Putin's patron-client network developed and acquired control across institutions and how, in turn, the Russian ruler elevated himself over his own ruling coalition and moved towards personalism.

While we draw from theories of personalist rule to explain Russian

politics, the study of the emergence of President Putin's regime also illuminates how other personalist regimes emerge and develop. As such, three basic questions guide the overall approach to the book:

How do incumbent rulers acquire and maintain personal control over their political regimes?

How can scholars of non-democratic politics study and observe regime personalisation?

How can this be leveraged to better understand recent developments in Russian politics?

The lessons of this book therefore extend beyond the study of Russia. Many countries that had previously undergone democratic transitions have acquired the characteristics of personalist regimes, including Belarus, Nicaragua, Venezuela, or Uganda. Indeed, regime personalisation may be encountered in more democratic settings. An elected leader may come to acquire personal control over institutions and emerge dominant. Such leaders may transform their regime into a more personalist direction, as achieved by Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus, or come close to it, such as Hugo Chávez of Venezuela. They can also transform their regimes toward the so-called “illiberal democracy” model while retaining basic democratic parameters, such as what Victor Orbán of Hungary arguably did.

As Figure 1.1 demonstrates, with military and party regimes in decline, alongside dominant party regimes personalist ones have emerged as the predominant form of non-democratic rule in the post Cold-war period. Their numbers have grown not only in absolute but also percentage terms, relative to other dictatorships. Personalist regimes are therefore increasingly common, as we can see with the examples of Russia, Venezuela, or Belarus and as evidenced from Figure 1.1. Furthermore, in numerous regimes that would not necessarily be classified as fully personalist, that is, outside of the list of personalist regimes—such as China under Xi Jinping or Nicaragua under Daniel Ortega—significant personalisation has also taken place with leaders acquiring more political control at the expense of institutions. The phenomenon of personalist politics is therefore even more prevalent today than the trend in fully personalist regimes, as displayed in figure 1.1.

Personalist leaders play a very important role in contemporary global affairs. The turn the in domestic and foreign policy of Venezuela under Hugo Chávez, the unpredictable foreign policy of Libya under

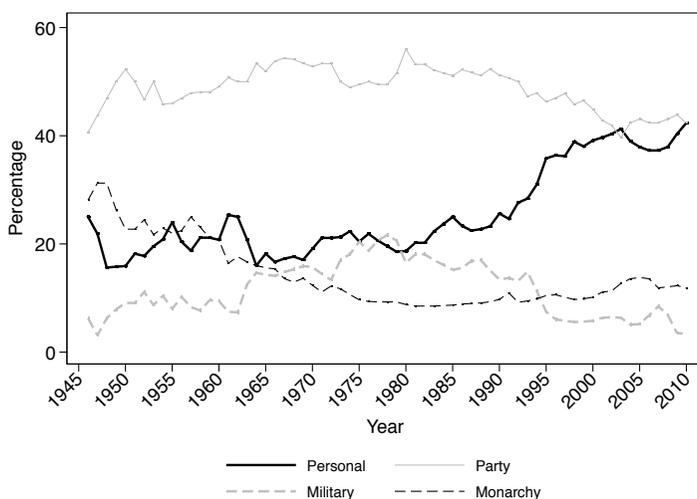


Figure 1.1: *Non-democratic regimes, 1945–2010.*

Note: Based on the data from Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2014).

Muammar Gaddafi or, more recently, the annexation of the Crimea in 2014 by Russia under Vladimir Putin are only a few notable examples. Likewise, despite China having formally remained a party-based regime, its leader, Xi Jinping, was able to amass an unprecedented degree of personal power, as evidenced by policy and personnel decisions taken at the recent 2017 Communist Party of China Congress.⁵ The ability of Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, leaders of the two most important non-democratic regimes in the world today, to diminish the autonomy of existing institutions and personalise their regimes to a significant degree, provokes alarm that their countries' foreign and domestic policies may become even more unpredictable.

In summary, it is very important to understand the mechanisms of personalist politics. Personalist regimes are not a niche subject. The book therefore has several goals. First, we explain the logic of regime personalisation by focusing on the politics within the Russian ruling coalition over time and placing the Russian regime in a comparative context. We particularly emphasise that because personalisation occurs at the same time as authoritarian reversal, scholars must account for

⁵See *The Wall Street Journal*. (2018). "Xi Jinping, President for Life" 25 February 2018. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/xi-jinping-president-for-life-1519598379>. Accessed 20 March 2018.

and distinguish between both processes. In so doing, we provide important insights about regime development, elite management, and power relations that are obscured if we instead look at Russia only from the perspective of democratic breakdown or failed democratisation. Second, therefore, we explain Russian politics from a new angle. Third, we contribute to more general comparative and theoretical debates on the onset and development of personalist regimes. Fourth, we propose new methods and tools suitable for the study of opaque regimes.

The *New Kremlinology* complements and validates existing qualitative assessments of informal politics in Russia (Hale 2014; Ledeneva 2006, 2013; Sakwa 2011; Shevtsova 2007; Zygur 2016). It does not have the ambition to offer a grand new theory of politics, nor does it focus solely on idiosyncratic facts about Russia. Instead, it offers a novel and rigorous re-examination of Russian politics as the process of regime personalisation. Our primary goal is to reconsider Russian political regimes as personalist in the making and offer a systematic empirical examination of the micro-foundations of personalist rule. In contrast to the minute coverage of Kremlin politics by Russia watchers, the book, while rich in detail, is firmly grounded in theories of personalist rule, and places the Russian regime in a comparative context.

Is the Russian Regime Personalist?

Is Russia a personalist regime? Or is it not? Is it a regime with important personalist features instead? To be personalist, a given regime must first of all be recognised as non-democratic, since a personalist regime is a type of dictatorship (non-democracy) by definition (Geddes, Wright and Frantz 2014). In almost three decades since the breakdown of the Soviet Union, there has been a noticeable lack of agreement as to whether the Russian regime could be described as nondemocratic, partly democratic, or even democratic—albeit with adjectives (McFaul 2000). Nor is there consensus as to when transitions between these regime types took place. The influential Polity IV project rather “leniently” categorises Putin’s regime as a democracy as late as 2007, when the latter is reclassified as partly democratic instead. In contrast, the Freedom House categorises it as non-democratic as early as 2004, but ignores further deterioration until 2014.⁶

⁶ *Polity IV* (Marshall and Jaggers 2011) upgrades Russia from partly democratic at +3 in 1999 to democracy at +6 in 2000, mainly due to its very arguable improvement in executive constraints; in 2007 it downgrades it back to +4, i.e., “anocracy.” As late as 2010, the country report argued that “there is no reason to think that Putin will seek to eliminate Russia’s fragile democratic institutions

Over time, comparative politics scholarship by and large has come to accept the reality of strong authoritarian tendencies in Russia. The predominant view appears to regard Russia as a regime in the middle, that is, neither fully authoritarian nor fully democratic. Thus, Levitsky and Way (2010) and Treisman (2011) treat Russia as a competitive authoritarian regime—a stable form of rule that is distinct from authoritarianism. Similarly, Hale (2005) defines Russia as a hybrid regime that combines democratic and authoritarian aspects. Accounts that measure political regimes as binary categories, that is, democracies or non-democracies, tend to regard Russia as a dictatorship. For example, Cheibub, Gandhi and Vreeland (2010) treat Russia as a dictatorship throughout 1991–2008, and—since it is not defined as democratic—include neither the 1993 paraconstitutional changes by Yeltsin nor a more recent 2008 manipulation of term limits as instances of “consolidation of incumbency advantage.” In turn, Svoboda (2012) defines it as authoritarian from 2005 despite the ruling coalition that formed in the 1990s arguably continuing into the 2000s (e.g., Shevtsova 2007, 36–40).

The authoritarian reversal in Russia under Vladimir Putin is well documented (Gill 2015*a*; Hale 2014, 267–291; Levitsky and Way 2010, 186–201). Overall, in the period following 1999 there was never anything as drastic as a constitutional referendum, dismissal of parliament, or enactment of enabling laws. Instead, there was a gradual acquisition of more and more authority by the Kremlin from early on. The ease of regime transformation under Vladimir Putin was facilitated by the 1993 constitution, which is strongly biased in favour of the president. Arguably, democratic reversal in Russia should be dated not to 1999 but to as early as 1993 when President Yeltsin abrogated the existing constitution at the time, dissolved the legislature, and suspended the constitutional court (Parrish 1998, 63). Boris Yeltsin largely forsook his new formidable constitutional authority either because of personal pro-democratic preferences (Levitsky and Way 2010, 82), or because of a lack of financial resources (Treisman 2011). Not so Vladimir Putin.

From the very beginning, President Putin has turned to the project of strengthening the state, while at the same time taking ever more control from the executive, legislative, judiciary branches, as well as

in the near future.” See the Russia country report at <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/Russia2010.pdf>, accessed 17 November 2018. In contrast, Freedom House is harsher and it treats Russia as partly democratic until 2004, when it becomes unfree, “due to the virtual elimination of influential political opposition parties within the country and the further concentration of executive power.” See the *Freedom in the World* 2005 report at <http://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2005/russia>, accessed 17 November 2018.

regional authorities and state companies. The president was able to exploit the successes of the second Chechen war and improved consumer sentiment driven by economic growth into high rates of public approval unmatched by other politicians (Treisman 2011).

Regional governors proved serious rivals to the Kremlin in the 1990s as they had significant control over public sector workers, regional enforcement agencies, and serious administrative and regulatory powers (Hale 2003, 243). In 2000, therefore, new laws were adopted that stripped governors of automatic membership in the Federation Council, the upper chamber (Oversloot 2007). Governors, now lacking the automatic parliamentary immunity enjoyed from 1996–2000, could also be dismissed if they violated federal laws.⁷ Following the 2004 Beslan terror attack, the president introduced further measures to curtail regional powers and abolished direct elections of governors. Although candidates proposed by the president were to be formally approved by regional legislatures, the president could *de facto* appoint them. In 2012, however, following the wave of 2011–12 protests, President Medvedev returned direct gubernatorial elections. Still, the system was more restrictive than that previously abolished in 2004, with cumbersome registration requirements in place.

Civil liberties have also been curtailed gradually over time. In 2002 a new law on extremist activities made it easier to hinder or ban political opponents, with even harsher amendments in force from 2006. From 2004 a new law made it very difficult to initiate a referendum and also firewalled many issues from plebiscites. Likewise, from 2004 the freedom of assembly was significantly restricted and from 2006 the registration of NGOs was made even more difficult. From 2009 instead of electoral deposits, candidates were required to collect signatures, which made it generally easier to disqualify undesirable candidates. In 2012 the freedom of assembly was further curtailed with the introduction of very steep financial penalties for participation. The same year, a new law related to foreign agents further curtailed NGOs, a defamation law, as well as internet restrictions were all rolled out. 2014 saw a new law restricting foreign ownership of the media, in effect curtailing many previously independent media outlets.

The democratic erosion underway was not checked by the courts because the judiciary had lost its, however partial, independence. In 2000 the president appointed his representatives to judiciary qualifica-

⁷The federal executive also stripped regional governors of their authority over regional police. Thus, in August 2001 the president acquired authority over firings and hirings of regional heads of police and, in 2006, more police officials could be appointed by the president.

tion collegiums—bodies responsible for judicial appointments. During the 2001–02 judicial reform under Dmitry Kozak, another associate of Vladimir Putin, the judiciary came under firmer presidential control at the expense of regional authorities.⁸ Another powerful office that on occasion was a thorn in Yeltsin’s side in the 1990s, that of the prosecutor general, has also come under the firm control of the executive.

The erosion of political rights over time has resembled death by a thousand cuts. As documented by Trofimov (2012), in 2001 and then in 2004 new regulations on party membership and regional quotas made life very difficult for small parties with limited resources. In 2005, the mixed electoral system was abandoned for party lists (in effect from 2007), only to return to the mixed-member system again in 2016. Electoral party blocks were banned in 2005 and a seven percent electoral threshold was introduced. In 2006, the “against all” option⁹ was banned in elections and in late 2006 a minimum turnout was scrapped to avoid possible boycotts. As a result of electoral changes, as well as financial and career incentives, elites have rallied under the umbrella of the ruling party, *United Russia* (Oversloot and Verheul 2006; Remington and Reuter 2009; Reuter 2017).

The legislature has transformed into a reliable “rubber stamp”, endorsing all major policy initiatives proposed by the Kremlin. Consider the extent of executive control over the legislature in Russia. As the world reeled from its actions in Ukraine in late February 2014, the Russian Federation Council (senate) swiftly and unanimously approved the president’s request to deploy troops in Ukraine on 1 March 2014. None of the legislators present thought of even debating the bill. It took them less than an hour from the time of registration to vote unanimously on a bill that could potentially have led the country into war.¹⁰ Just as swiftly, senators revoked the resolution on 25 June

⁸In 2014 the Supreme Court was merged with the Supreme Arbitration Court. The latter was arguably the most professional judiciary institution in the country that had often ruled against authorities in its tax claims against businessmen. The merger thus reduced judicial independence even further.

⁹See Oversloot, van Holsteyn and van den Berg (2002) on how the option was used to express voter dissatisfaction.

¹⁰The daily transcript indicates that registration began at 18:32 and the vote on the resolution took place at 19:22. The senators directed no questions to either deputy foreign minister Karasin who spoke on the president’s behalf or the deputy defence minister who was also present. Instead fifteen senators all in turn quickly spoke in favour of the resolution until one, Anatolii Lyskov, decided that they were “wasting the President’s time” and that “they understood it all.” See the 1 March transcript at <http://council.gov.ru/activity/meetings/>, accessed 1 August 2014.

2014 when political expediency demanded it, with 153 votes in favour to just one against. Following the vote, the speaker asked whether the lawmaker who voted against had accidentally pressed the wrong button.¹¹ Similarly, in July 2018 when legislators were presented with a bill on an unpopular reform regarding retirement age, all deputies but one from the *United Russia* ruling party voted in favour. Ironically, the only dissenting vote came from Natalya Poklonskaya who had joined the Duma deputies' ranks from a newly acquired Crimea.¹²

In the beginning of this section we posited the question as to whether the Russian regime is personalist. What is clear is that the regime began as partly democratic in 1999 only to transform itself very gradually into something else entirely. There are various features of contemporary Russian politics that do not completely fit with the argument that the Russian regime is fully personalist. The majority of observers recognise the continuing presence of certain pluralistic elements in Russian politics and regard the regime as not fully authoritarian, and therefore, not personalist. In contrast, scholars who do define Russia as non-democratic, typically categorise it as a personalist type of non-democracy. Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2014) define the regime as personalist from as early as 1994, ever since Yeltsin's takeover in late 1993. However, as we explain in the empirical chapters below, even after 2012 Russia is very different from such personalist regimes as those of Bermukhamedov in Turkmenistan or even Lukashenko of Belarus, let alone from strong personal rulerships such as those of François Duvalier (1957–71) of Haiti or Jean-Bédél Bokassa (1966–79) of the Central African Republic. While studies exist that examine personalisation of politics in contemporary Russia (e.g., Baturo and Elkind 2016; Dawisha 2014; Judah 2014; Ledeneva 2006, 2013), such accounts are difficult to reconcile with the relative strength of institutions in Russia, the fact that there have been only rather half-hearted attempts to develop Putin's personality cult, if at all, and that there has been formal compliance with presidential term limits from 2008 to 2012—unusual for a personalist regime (Baturo 2014; Baturo and Mikhaylov 2014). Reuter (2017) also makes a powerful argument for the importance of the *United Russia* ruling party for regime governance.

¹¹See *Reuters*, July 25, 2014, "Russian Lawmakers Revoke Right to Send Troops into Ukraine," <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/06/25/us-ukraine-crisis-russia-parliament-idUSKBN0F00VG20140625>. Accessed 17 November 2018.

¹²See *Moscow Times*, July 27, 2018, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/one-united-russia-deputy-defies-leadership-on-pension-vote-refuses-calls-to-resign-62365>. Accessed 17 November 2018.

Still, at the same time we cannot dismiss the view that Russia is developing into a personalist regime. The majority of informed observers would agree that from at least 2014, if not earlier, Russia has exhibited many features associated with a personalist regime. For example, Andrei Kolesnikov, the chair of the Russian domestic politics and institutions programme at the Carnegie Moscow Center, argued that Putin's regime was clearly personalist. In an interview, Kolesnikov underlined that "everything that happens in a personalist regime, all decisions that are taken in a personalist regime, they are all in one head. People keep saying 'why is that that we talk about Putin all the time, we analyse Putin?' But who else are we to analyse?"¹³

Both officials and observers of Russian politics point out that Vladimir Putin appears to be able to make most important decisions, since at least sometime in the period following his return to the Kremlin from the office of prime minister in 2012, by himself.¹⁴ Indeed, the characteristics shared by personalist regimes, i.e., an absence of autonomous institutions or elite coalitions autonomous from the ruler (Geddes 1999; Jackson and Rosberg 1982) and the ruler's permanent (Baturto 2014; Brooker 2000; Svolik 2012)—*de facto*, if not *de jure*—tenure are clearly present in contemporary Russia.¹⁵

Russian officials themselves appear to agree that their regime is personalist. We began this chapter with Vyachaslav Volodin's wording that equated, fused Putin with Russia. Over time, many regime insiders equally came to publicly acknowledge the ruler's paramount role. Irina Yarovaya, a member of the Russian parliament for *United Russia*, has arguably developed Volodin's argument further: "Ideally, the head of state should be inseparable from his people—this is what the people of all countries dream about. [...] Therefore, Putin's success—is Russia's success."¹⁶ Since then an avalanche of sycophantic declarations from all walks of life have appeared: "Putin is the pivotal centre of meaning in Russia"; "it seems that he is really the Russian tsar, the anointed one"; "When they aim at Putin—they aim at Russia", to give only a

¹³Interview with Andrei Kolesnikov at the Echo Moskvy, 12 October 2016, <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/personalnovash/1854068-echo>. Accessed 1 February 2017.

¹⁴See *The Times*, 2 May 2014, "Nostalgia Trip—Putin Taps Soviet Mood to Tighten Rule" (Ben Hoyle and Lettice Crawley), <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/europe/article4078880.ece>. Accessed 1 December 2016

¹⁵Following the 2008 constitutional amendment that in practice extended the possibility of remaining in office from 2012 to 2024, let alone *laissez-faire* interpretation of a two-term limit that permitted the return in 2012.

¹⁶Quoted in <http://tass.ru/politika/1527973>, accessed 1 December 2014.

few representative examples.¹⁷

After a decade and a half of seeing the same leader on their television screens—in a favourable light we must add—the majority of Russian voters have apparently come to see no viable political alternative to Vladimir Putin. Following Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012, the major Russian independent polling agency, *Levada-Center*, asked respondents whether they still wanted to see Vladimir Putin as president again following his third term in office after 2018. In October 2012 and 2013 around a third of respondents, 34 and 33 per cent respectively, confirmed a desire to see Vladimir Putin as president, while 40 and 45 per cent indicated that they did not. Even in 2014 58 per cent wanted him beyond 2018, and the percentage has only grown to 60 and 63 per cent in October of 2015 and 2016 respectively.

Furthermore, not only did the majority want Vladimir Putin to remain for longer, they apparently saw no alternative to the “national leader”: when asked whether they thought it was possible that a new leader would appear before 2018 who would be capable of replacing Vladimir Putin, the percentage who believed in the alternative declined from 49 per cent in 2012 to just 26 per cent in 2016.¹⁸ While public opinion in non-democratic regimes is certainly unreliable and may quickly change (e.g., Kuran 1991), it is worth noting that to a large extent Putin’s approval was driven by favourable economic conditions, at least in the beginning of his time in office (Treisman 2011). This is supported by experimental evidence indicating that his high approval, at least to some extent, reflects genuine attitudes (Frye, Gehlbach, Marquardt and Reuter 2017).

In summary, due to disagreement about the speed and extent of the process of authoritarian reversal in Russia, there is a degree of conceptual confusion as to whether Russia is a full-blown dictatorship or “only” a hybrid—that is, partly-democratic- or an electoral authoritarian regime. As a result, similar confusion as to whether Russia is a personalist regime persists because the literature only further categorises as personalist those regimes already defined as non-democratic. In turn, even if it is personalist it is admittedly not as personalist as many regimes defined as such in the literature—and if it is not personalist, it does however clearly exhibit important and increasing features of personalist regimes. These empirical issues raise important theoretical

¹⁷Quoted in <http://kommersant.ru/doc/3071074>; <https://lenta.ru/news/2016/12/01/hirurg/>; <http://izvestia.ru/news/602603>. Accessed 1 December 2016.

¹⁸<http://www.levada.ru/2016/11/16/alternativa-vladimiru-putinu-2/>, accessed 15 December 2016.

questions. What theories or theoretical approaches can explain developments within the Russian political regime under Vladimir Putin? How can we understand the process of regime personalisation? How can a regime that is partially but not fully personalist be understood?

We propose to distinguish between the process of authoritarian reversal and the process of regime personalisation. Because personal rulerships may emerge in previously democratic and partly democratic regimes, such as Russia, the acquisition of personal power by a leader is therefore a phenomenon that cuts across democratic, partly-democratic and nondemocratic regimes. A level of personalisation is present in all regimes—also evident in the literature on presidentialisation and personalisation in democratic regimes (e.g., Langer 2007; Webb and Poguntke 2013), which refers to very mild levels of personalisation—and is not only a feature of personalist regimes. Furthermore, because we see personalisation as a process, the onset of the transition towards a personalist regime potentially takes place long before it can be qualified as such.

Arguably, what would be recognised as personalisation later, once the regime passed the threshold of a dictatorship, under the democratic “phase” it may be seen as informal politics, clientelism, corruption, patronal politics, or non-compliance with presidential term limits (e.g., Baturu 2014; Hale 2014; Helmke and Levitsky 2004, 2006; Ledeneva 2013). The literature has examined the process of regime personalisation but only among regimes that have already been defined as non-democratic (Geddes, Wright and Frantz 2018; Svobik 2012). If the process of regime personalisation begins under democratic or partly democratic regime, and continues even after such a regime has become non-democratic, there are compelling reasons not to compartmentalise research areas. Instead, we can examine regime personalisation as a process that traverses more and less democratic stages of one and the same regime. That is, our explanation allows a more nuanced view than debating whether Russia is partly democratic, competitively authoritarian, or authoritarian.

As we explain later in the book, we find that one third of personalist regimes in the world develop from within democratic, partly democratic, and transitional regimes following independence. It is extremely unlikely that the process of personalisation only starts in earnest once a previously democratic regime has passed the threshold of non-democracy, as defined by scholars or policy-makers who assess the state of democracy. It is more likely that regime personalisation, and de-democratisation, occur simultaneously.

Figure 1.2 is a conceptual map that plots different paths toward

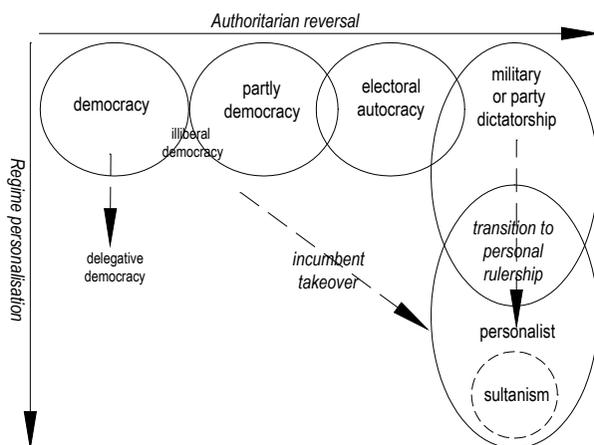
personalism. It shows that personalism can develop not only from an already existing dictatorship but also from a previously democratic or partly democratic regime. The horizontal axis in Figure 1.2 maps political regimes from democratic to less democratic. When a regimes moves from left to right, it undergoes the process of authoritarian reversal (Svolik 2008), democratic breakdown (Bermeo 2003), democratic erosion (Huntington 1996), democratic backsliding (Bermeo 2016), regression of democracy (Erdmann and Kneuer 2011), or de-democratisation (Bogaards 2018). While there are important distinctions between terms—regarding the degree of change or the assumed outcome—for simplicity we rely on the term of authoritarian reversal to refer to change away from more democratic settings. Equally, there are important distinctions between democracies with adjectives and electoral authoritarian regimes, and between electoral authoritarian and full authoritarian ones (Bogaards 2009; Collier and Levitsky 1997; Levitsky and Way 2010; Schedler 2006). Democracies may also become “illiberal”¹⁹ but arguably fall short of possible down ranking to a partly democratic status, such as Hungary from 2010 (Bogaards 2018). For simplicity, we assume one underlying latent dimension from more to less democracy marking a possible overlap between regime types with criss-crossing lines.

When a country “moves” from left to right on the horizontal axis, it is down ranked on its democracy indices. Freedom House distinguishes between “free”, “partly free” and “not free” regimes. Based on the Freedom House data, we examined all transitions from the 1972–2015 period when regimes were down ranked. There are 60 transitions in democracy status from “free” to “partly free” and 47 transitions from either “free” or “partly free” to “not free”, i.e., transitions from democracy to partly democracy, and from partly democracy to either electoral or full authoritarian regime. We have read through the relevant country annual reports to identify and assign aggregate categories for general reasons behind downgrading.

Figure 1.3 indicates that while countries are down ranked for various reasons, such as electoral irregularities, repression of the opposition, coups or attempted coups, the most common reason behind transitions to “unfree” status are the actions of elected executives that we aggregate as “executive power concentration, various” category.²⁰ Al-

¹⁹In some sense, “illiberal democracy” is a misnomer since democracy has to be liberal by definition.

²⁰Thus, “Djibouti’s political rights rating declined from 5 to 6 and its status from Partly Free to Not Free due to constitutional changes that will allow President Ismael Omar Guelleh to run for a third term in office.” See <https://freedomhouse.org/>

Figure 1.2: *Conceptual Map*

together, 27 instances or 57 per cent of transitions to non-democratic rule result from such actions of incumbent leaders. If we add delayed or disputed election, or instances of repression against political opponents, altogether there are 35 transitions, or three fourths of all transitions to non-democratic rule that are due to the actions of incumbent leaders.

The executive power concentration, as seen in Figure 1.3, reflects not only democratic decline but also, because it benefits the executive—the president or prime minister—the personal power acquisition by incumbent leaders. The process of regime personalisation is also conceptually distinct from that of authoritarian reversal.²¹ Returning to an earlier Figure 1.2, we plot the process of regime personalisation on a vertical scale. The scale ranges from less to more personal power of the

report/freedom-world/2011/djibouti. In turn, “Russia’s political rights rating declined from 5 to 6, and its status from Partly Free to Not Free, due to the virtual elimination of influential political opposition parties within the country and the further concentration of executive power.” See <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2005/russia>. Accessed 17 December 2017.

²¹It is conceptually distinct but not completely unrelated to it. For example, one of the attributes of Concept 8: Competitive Elections is not “attempts by the incumbent to extend their term in office by ‘dubious’ constitutional means” (Marshall and Jagers 2011, 61). As we discuss below, permanency in office and the breakdown of term limits—which will be reflected in democracy indices—are important components of personalisation. Other components may or may not be captured by democracy rankings.

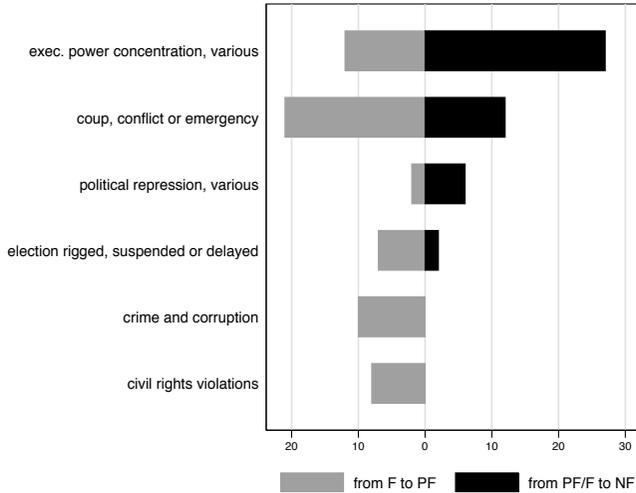


Figure 1.3: *Authoritarian Reversals, 1972–2015.*

Note: Based on Freedom House Status change to Free to Partly Free and from Free or Partly Free to Not Free. Frequencies are reported; one and the same regime can transit more than once. Categories are chosen based on Freedom House annual country reports for the year of status change, coded by authors.

ruler, from the situation where the ruler is subject to constraints to his authority, be that formal or informal—such as when it is dictated by the norms of collective leadership to “one person rule” at the bottom of the scale. As we explain in the next section, regime personalisation is a multidimensional concept that goes beyond the concentration of power. For simplicity, however, we here assume that personalisation is one latent dimension primarily centred on personal power.

We distinguish between three types of transition. First, regime personalisation occurs on its own, with the value of authoritarian reversal “fixed.” This happens when an already non-democratic regime—military or party-based—degenerates into personal rulership (Brooker 2000, 129). Figure 1.2 denotes such a transition by a dashed downward arrow on the right. Not all highly personalist regimes—as we explain in Chapter 2—are sultanistic as described in Chehabi and Linz (1998) (the extreme form of arbitrariness, corruption and ruler’s personal power over elites). Second, an elected democratic leader may increase personal influence at the expense of existing institutions, albeit falling short of a democratic breakdown. This process may result in the so-called “delegative democracy” (O’Donnell 1994). While delegative democracy

broadly indicates some deficiency in horizontal accountability, it also implies that a leader is able to bypass existing institutions by relying on his or her electoral mandate alone. This transition is represented by a short dashed downward line on the left of Figure 1.2. Even a short downward line is likely to turn into a diagonal one, however, as significant increases in personalisation will affect the process of democratic backsliding. Equally, the transition to personal rulership (right hand side arrow) is often accompanied by repression so that the line will also not be fully vertical. We therefore think of two transitions as ideal types.

The third and final transition is a simultaneous change on both axes—represented by the diagonal line in the middle of Figure 1.2. The process is oftentimes defined as the incumbent takeover, or *autogolpe* launched by an elected democratic president “to misappropriate the public office and powers he acquired by democratic, constitutional means” (Brooker 2000, 129). In other words, to transition to dictatorship by an incumbent (Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub and Limongi 2000, 21). When the ruler succeeds in his mission and acquires personal control over the political regime, such a ruler will also arrive at the stage when the regime may be defined as personalist. Russia provides an example of the third transition, whereby personalism results from incumbent regime takeover by an elected ruler in a previously democratic or partly democratic regime.

Such an acquisition of personal power as in Russia occurs at the same time or in parallel to the process of authoritarian reversal. As a result, important aspects of personalisation that facilitate not only the acquisition of personal power by the ruler but also democratic deterioration and its breakdown—such as the penetration of president’s patron-client network into existing political institutions and deinstitutionalisation—may be confused with “normal” informal politics and corruption that are prevalent in weak democracies. Furthermore, regime personalisation is a multidimensional process, that is, there is not one but several “personalisations.” Below we explain what these are and outline the theoretical framework we rely on throughout this book.

Regime Personalisation: The Argument in Brief

How should we study regime personalisation? Since the identity of the individual ruler is paramount in a personalist regime and institutions are either malleable or a mere facade, the study of such regimes presents a unique challenge to empirically oriented scholars. In Russia, the influ-

ence of Vladimir Putin on the evolution of the political regime cannot be underestimated. However, to avoid an idiosyncratic explanation our scope goes beyond the identity of the Russian president: instead, we focus on the relationship between the ruler and the most important political actors in the regime—i.e. the ruling coalition.

The ruling coalition in Russia—the subject of several chapters in this book—is frequently referred to as “Collective Putin” (*Kollektivnyi Putin*), signifying not only the similarity between the ruler and his supporters and the fact that Vladimir Putin does not rule alone, but also the lack of information among outside experts as to whom specific policies may be attributed. In the absence of other information, or perhaps in addition to it, the book reveals how we can gain important insights from careful theory-building and analyses of publicly available data. We investigate features of the ruling coalition, such as the relationships of top officials with the president and other leaders of the regime, their policy influence, rhetoric, and career trajectories.

Because we depart from rigid, “ideal type” thinking about non-democratic and personalist regimes, we emphasise the regime trajectory and change over time. As we explain in detail in Chapter 2, we study regime personalisation as a dynamic and multidimensional concept, accounting for the growing influence of the ruler’s personal patron-client network, overall regime deinstitutionalisation, and the informational aspects of authoritarian rule that render the ruler preeminent in the media. Furthermore, to become a focal point of elite coordination, the ruler’s authority must be perceived as permanent.

The theoretical framework we develop focuses on four pillars of the process of regime personalisation. First, personalisation is driven by patronage networks, particularly the ruler’s own patronage network of friends, former colleagues, and business partners. Second, as these informal networks gain power and control, deinstitutionalisation—another important aspect of personalisation—follows. Third, for the leader to become the “only game in town”, it is necessary to become a focal point of elite coordination and establish the perception of a permanent office. Fourth, for the leader to fully personalise the regime, he must acquire media dominance. The four components and their interactions are depicted schematically in Figure 1.4. Throughout the book, we study the micro-logic of the four pillars and how they contribute to overall regime personalisation using the regime of Vladimir Putin from 1999 as a case study.

We explain how Vladimir Putin’s patron-client network developed and acquired control across institutions and how in turn the Russian ruler elevated himself over his own ruling coalition, establishing

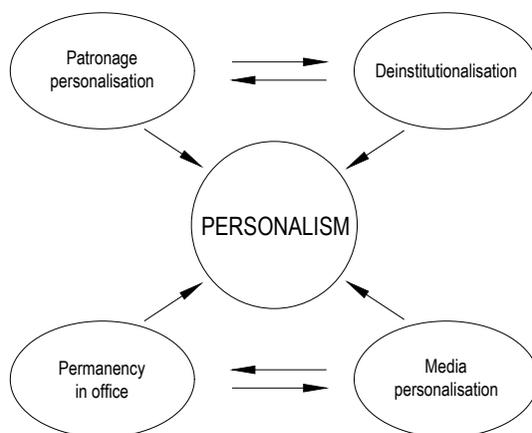


Figure 1.4: *Personalism: the Argument*

personal rule. We therefore make an argument connecting the onset of personalism to the dominance of Vladimir Putin’s patron-client network over time and across institutions in the process of so-called *patronage personalisation*. We introduce original data on patron-client networks in Russia and map these networks over time. Based on expert surveys of policy influence, we further explain how Putin’s patron-client network has grown in dominance over time. We find that the path toward personalisation in Russia was centred on the relatively swift acquisition of control over security and enforcement institutions, but a much more gradual penetration of other institutions by the ruler’s network. We also find that within the ranks of the Russian ruling coalition, this network emerges as dominant in early 2007, which permitted Vladimir Putin to govern from the subordinate position of prime minister from 2008–12. The patron-client network had further consolidated in strength and scope by 2012. Furthermore, Putin’s return to presidential office, which even without the formal cancellation of term limits permitted the Russian ruler to retain power until 2024, made him largely autonomous from his own coalition.

The change in the relationship between the ruler and the ruling coalition in turn influenced the degree of the former’s discretion in policy-making, personnel policy, political rhetoric and, more importantly, future regime trajectory. We propose to distinguish between three stages of regime personalisation in Russia: regime takeover, con-

solidation, and establishment of personalism. In the first two stages the ruler relies on his patron-client network which competes with other networks and penetrates political institutions; in the third stage, the ruler is largely autonomous from his ruling coalition.

We connect the development and, arguably, onset of personalism primarily to the dominance of Vladimir Putin's patron-client network over time and across the institutions of the political regime. As a result of such penetration of the ruler's network, the regime becomes more deinstitutionalised, wherein the personal attributes of officeholders, such as their informal connections, become more important than the formal power of their office. This can be seen by the simultaneous direction of effects between *patronage personalisation* and *deinstitutionalisation* in Figure 1.4. Second, therefore, we explain and assess the dynamics of regime deinstitutionalisation by looking at appointments, dismissals, and reshuffles of the top elite, and discuss the implications for regime personalisation. Svoboda (2012, 79–80), while contrasting dictatorships based on power-sharing and personal rulerships, argues that the latter are more prone to experience constant purges, rotations, and dismissals. This happens not only to prevent political actors from setting up their own power bases, but also to signal publicly the ruler's pre-eminence over his supporters. On the contrary, from anecdotal evidence it appears that Putin practices the so-called "stability of cadres" wherein loyal individuals typically do not leave the ranks of the ruling coalition. We therefore examine the dynamics of dismissals and rotations in the inner circle of the Russian political regime and what it tells us about its personalisation.

Drawing on expert survey data and original data on the careers of individual members of the political elite, we analyse the results of a statistical model—the technical details of which are relegated to the appendix—to estimate the relative importance of office versus officeholder in determining overall influence on Russian policy-making. We find that regime deinstitutionalisation has gradually increased from 1999 to 2011. However, there are visible signs of a reversal from 2012 onwards as the president begins to replace his old supporters and rely less on informal networks for governance. We argue that the increase in the rate of reshuffles, firing, and hiring—as well as replacement of the key members of Putin's inner circle—is an expected development given the stage of regime personalisation after 2012 when no political actor but the ruler is indispensable.

To become a focal point of elite coordination, the ruler's authority must also be perceived as permanent, that is, the ruler should not be constrained by formal limits on his time in office. We explain that

Putin's decision not to pursue a third term in 2008 was due to his idiosyncratic preferences to adhere to the constitutional rules, albeit formally. However, given the dominance of his patronage network by then, he was able to maintain control over the regime from the subordinate post of prime minister. Based on text analytics, we investigate the process of elite management during Medvedev's presidency, and discuss the logic of Putin's return in 2012 from the perspective of regime personalisation. We make a novel argument assessing the relative influence of President Medvedev from 2008–12 in a dual power structure. As yet another indicator of the increasing personalisation of Putin's regime we analyse the annual legislative addresses of regional governors. We infer the perceived distribution of power at the federal centre, as well as elite uncertainty about future regime direction, by examining the reaction of various followers—members of the ruling coalition—to rhetorical signals by Putin and Medvedev. We rely on policy positions revealed in regional legislative addresses to gauge how elites perceived the distribution of power in Moscow. We find that governors moved from a neutral position in 2009 to a clearly pro-Putin one in 2011, and that policy initiatives advocated by Medvedev all but evaporated from the rhetoric of governors in 2012–13. We also show that the very weak personal patronage network upon which he could rely largely negated Medvedev's strong presidential powers.

In addition, the ruler should be perceived as an indispensable and preeminent actor in order to develop strong media dominance or even the elements of a personality cult. As a fourth characteristic of regime personalisation, we therefore analyse Putin's dominance over both national and regional media through a battery of analysis undertaken of newspaper contents and television transcripts. While as of 2018 the regime of Vladimir Putin does not exhibit the attributes of a cult of personality—one of the expected aspects of personalist regimes (Geddes 1999)—empirically, we do find a trend in that direction. There is a trajectory toward increased media coverage of the leader over time, in particular relative to the formal institutions of the state. For example, while Vladimir Putin's athletic pursuits, pets, and holidays have always been the subject of media coverage, in September 2018 Russian state television launched on prime time a new weekly show entitled "Moscow. Kremlin. Putin." Dedicated specifically to Vladimir Putin, it clearly blurs the lines between his public activities as president and private pursuits as an individual.²² While we see a trend towards topics more

²²A well-known commentator on Russian politics, Gleb Pavlovsky, warned that "A change is taking place. Putin's image is being equated to the image of the state."

of interest to Putin personally, such as Russia's standing internationally, we only see modest impacts of personalisation on media content and presence. The importance of international or domestic events outside the control of the leader renders a textual analysis of the media as a less useful tool in the detection of the development of personalisation however.

Throughout, we consistently distinguish between the process of an overall authoritarian reversal and the process of regime personalisation. The focus on regime personalisation permits us to understand the gradual changes of Putin's regime from 1999 and provides a more nuanced perspective on the mechanisms underlying the gradual democratic breakdown of the Russian political regime. In summary, drawing on different types of empirical evidence—patronage relationships, institutionalisation, the alignment of revealed policy preferences, and media prominence and content—*The New Kremlinology* maps the process of regime personalisation in Russia. Our pillars of personalisation are not exhaustive and other dimensions are relevant. The blurring of public and private domains and rent-seeking behaviour of political elites is a crucial aspect of personalisation and certainly also of Putin's Russia (Dawisha 2014). Propaganda, censorship, and news management form a key element in the development of a personalist regime. For the sake of brevity, our study focuses on the patronage networks and media content elements of the process, however, while other features are left for future research. The conceptual discussion in the next chapter therefore provides a more wide-ranging framework as a foundation not only of this volume, but also a broader research agenda.

The New Kremlinology: Research Challenges

In personalist regimes the ability to predict or explain important policy initiatives—largely determined by the whim of one political actor—is limited. It is therefore not surprising that many scholars turn to political psychology or rely on the political biographies of personalist leaders to understand these regimes. It is also not surprising that the observers of recent Russian politics have also had to guess and look for cues from the press releases of public appearances by the president. Consider the following example.

On 30 August 2015 the Kremlin released a press release about President Putin and Prime Minister Medvedev exercising in a gym together. Their training session was followed by a BBQ and tea party

See Halpin and Kravchenko (2018).

with both leaders in attendance.²³ The photos, in which the tracksuit-clad president appeared to demonstrate the proper form of a seated cable row for his colleague—13 years his junior—who in turn attempted several chin-ups, immediately attracted interest. The apparent good physical form of Russian leadership at the time notwithstanding, above all the press release triggered an avalanche of speculation about the likely implications of the two leaders appearing together. The editorial in the *Gazeta* daily underlined that the Kremlin did not typically release photos of informal get-togethers of Putin with other individuals for no reason, although the president's own athletic activities, e.g., ice hockey, martial arts, were always widely reported. Therefore, the editorial speculated, the release might have implied a possible re-emergence of the so-called “tandem”, i.e., the duality of power from 2008–12 when Putin served as prime minister, delegating the presidential office to Dmitry Medvedev who vacated it for his patron in 2012. The daily further argued that Medvedev still remained an acceptable candidate should he be nominated for the presidency again, if needed. The possible rationale, the editorial speculated, was that his return would permit the regime to retain power yet gradually change the radical foreign policy course since the accession of Crimea without losing face:

“According to this logic, Medvedev is responsible for neither the Crimea nor Donbass, yet he can begin to fix relations with the West ... In this scenario, Putin would have gone down in history as a gatherer of territories while the continuity of power would have in fact remained. We have already seen that Medvedev is not fundamentally different from Putin as president. Although Putin himself apparently did not think that, otherwise he would have allowed his successor to remain for a second term in office.”²⁴

In the end, the editorial concluded after all that the reason for the press-release may simply have been that “the two leaders met in Sochi, and Putin thought they both have not been shown together for a long time, so why not appear then? And then they had an excuse, and the tea, and the weather was good.”

The speculation over and attempts to read the tea leaves from this or similar press releases reveals more about the epistemology of studying

²³<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50197>, accessed 7 September 2015.

²⁴*Gazeta*, 31 August 2015, “Trenirovka Tandema”, http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2015/08/31_e_7731899.shtml, accessed 7 September 2015.

Kremlin politics than about the subject itself. Indeed, journalists, scholars, and observers of Russian politics alike are largely deprived of public sources of information about what is really going on behind Kremlin walls. Furthermore, many tools and theories developed in comparative politics to study institutions are not applicable in the increasingly closed and ossified politics of Russia. Arguably, its political institutions do not work as they are supposed to and merely provide an official facade to mask the informal processes and arrangements that make up the “real” politics of Russia (Ledeneva 2006, 2013). In other words, real politics are conducted under the proverbial carpet.²⁵ Partly as a result, because the Russian leader has assumed such a prominent role, political biographies of Vladimir Putin (e.g., Gessen 2012; Myers 2016; Rahr 2008) can arguably be employed as important sources about the likely direction of Russian political regime, alongside expert reconstructions of informal politics in the Kremlin (Dawisha 2014; Ledeneva 2013; Sakwa 2011).

Students of the Soviet Union will be struck by how familiar the interpretation of the Sochi retreat in 2015, above, would have been to those available to scholars studying Soviet politics in the past (Brown 1984; Hodnett 1975; Stern 1978). Similarly, sovietologists or, for that matter, kremlinologists—scholars who specialised in the politics of the Soviet Union generally or its elite level politics specifically—attempted to infer policy changes from the slightest modulations in wording on the front page articles of the leading newspapers or the physical standing of politicians during parades. For example, Ryavec (1982, 119) analyzed that “Chernenko, five years younger, seems closer to Brezhnev and is probably making the most of his control of the General Department and the recent broadening of his activities. At Suslov’s funeral in January 1982 he was right next to Brezhnev, a row ahead of Kirilenko.” Clearly, this is not that different from inferring changes in policy based on the Sochi joint workout.

The title of the book, *The New Kremlinology*, is chosen to emphasise not only the subject matter, the *what*, but also the *how*—the battery of innovative methods we employ for a better understanding of the politics of a non-democratic regime. In the past, the old kremlinology inferred information about Soviet leadership from indirect sources, whether revelations about the direction of future policies from Soviet official historiography, physical arrangements of the political elite during official

²⁵For an example of an expert survey reconstruction of informal politics, see Minchenko Consulting, *Politburo and the Syrian Gambit: Komintern 2.0 versus Gosplan 2.0* or *Big Government of Vladimir Putin and “Politburo 2.0” Report*, <http://minchenko.ru/analitika/>, accessed August 2, 2013.

ceremonies and parades, unconfirmed explanations of Soviet leaders' motives by their Chinese peers revealed during Soviet–Chinese tensions, or the tone of publications in literary journals (e.g., Cocks, Daniels and Heer 1976). The obscurity and distortions of Kremlin politics, which was most of the time intentional, was precisely why scholars studying the subject came to be known collectively as “kremlinologists.” “The most obvious danger is that of the distortion and misperception of this partial information; the only sure correction would seem to be continual checking against whatever open factual materials exist, and a large dose of humility” (Heer 1976, 12). As Brzezinski underlined, to assert an argument about Soviet politics was “not the same as to prove it,” as important propositions were “elusive of the reassuring precision of the statistical method, and require somewhat impressionistic and therefore also controversial judgements” (Brzezinski 1976, 347).

It is certainly true that many aspects of politics in the Kremlin have returned to the opaque style of Soviet times. In Russia, the influence of Vladimir Putin on the evolution of the political regime cannot be underestimated. However, to avoid an idiosyncratic explanation the scope of this book moves beyond the identity of the Russian president. As discussed earlier, we focus on the relationship between the ruler and the most important political actors in the regime, whom we refer to as the Russian ruling coalition. Furthermore, the methods and types of data sources we employ suggest new avenues of the study of authoritarian regimes, including those in the making. We therefore also contribute methodologically to the wider literature on personalisation and regime transitions.

Specifically, in the absence of public information on the inner workings of the contemporary Russian political regime, contemporary observers also rely on the unguarded comments of politicians, or speculation. This book addresses the problem of the opacity of authoritarian politics by relying on innovative methods, such as text analytics, typically used in the study of advanced democracies. We draw from originally collected text data, such as federal and regional annual state-of-the-union addresses, thousands of policy texts published on the president and prime minister’s web pages from 1999–2018, as well as a vast collection of newspaper articles and television transcripts. The book also relies on original data on patron-client networks in Russia from 1999 to 2016, sourced from various bibliographic data. Furthermore, it draws from an expert survey of individual policy influence of the most important members of the Russian ruling coalition, published in several Russian newspapers that we painstakingly sourced for each month from 1994 to 2016. We combine these data with originally

collected data on the political offices of these individuals over time. Altogether, we cover over 600 key decision-makers in Russia.

Plan of the Book

Chapter 2, which follows, forms the theoretical backbone of the book and places the study of personalisation in the Russian political regime in theoretical and comparative context. It discusses most important aspects of personalistic politics and emphasises four pillars—or dimensions that drive the process of regime personalisation. Each of these dimensions is then developed in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3—*The Politics of “Collective Putin”: Patronage and Regime Personalisation*—examines the crucial dimension of regime personalisation—the strength of the ruler’s patronage network—and charts how Vladimir Putin’s patron-client network developed and acquired control across institutions. When the personal individual policy influence increases in importance and political institutions (the cabinet, legislature, courts) diminish in policy influence, it is important to turn to the second component of the process of personalisation, overall regime deinstitutionalisation—the subject of Chapter 4. This chapter examines the process of deinstitutionalisation, as well as the dynamics of dismissals and rotations in the inner circle of the Russian regime.

Chapter 5—*Tandemology: the Problem of Succession*—explains the process of elite management during Medvedev’s presidency, and discusses the logic of Putin’s return in 2012 from the perspective of regime personalisation. The game of musical chairs played by Presidents Putin and Medvedev from 2008–12, which resembles the so-called *politique de doublure* (Chehabi and Linz 1998, 17), represents a crucial test as to whether the Russian regime has become personalised. To put it simply, if the regime is sufficiently personalised, the *de facto* leader is able to maintain control even from a nominally subordinate position. In Chapter 6—*Personalisation in the Media and Rhetoric*—we examine the coverage of Vladimir Putin and his “topics”—the main themes of his contributions in printed and electronic media over time. From the literature on personalist regimes we know that many such regimes practice the cult of personality as a governance method. While we find that only half-hearted attempts were made to develop Putin’s personality cult, if at all, his media dominance has increased over time, particularly in relation to media coverage of other politicians and institutions.

The final chapter reflects on the main research questions and summarises the findings. Drawing from Chapters 3 to 6, Chapter 7 reiterates the argument that the Russian political regime can be understood as a personalist regime in the making. We find that Russia is strongly personalist in terms of patronage networks, that it is moderately deinstitutionalised, that the ruler's authority is widely understood to be implicitly permanent in time, and that it has a relatively weak media personalisation. We propose to recognise the multidimensionality of personalistic politics and that political regimes neither necessarily resemble "ideal types", nor do they strive to become ever more personalist. In fact, as of 2018, the Russian personalist regime may be in a steady state that allows it to solve various problems of governance and that reflects preferences of the ruler and those of the ruling coalition.

Because the focus is on the dynamics of the Russian political regime that gradually acquired many—but not all—of the characteristics associated with a personalist regime, the study of the emergence of President Putin's regime also illuminates how other personalist regimes emerge, develop, and function. This book demonstrates how scholars of other non-democratic regimes may improve their studies by relying on similar techniques to those introduced in *The New Kremlinology*. In Chapter 7 we therefore also briefly discuss methodological implications for the study of authoritarian politics.