The Political Origins of Russia’s ‘Culture Wars’

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A sort of introduction

On 11 April 2014 a large banner was hung from the façade of the Dom knigi (House of books) building in central Moscow. Dom knigi is one of Moscow’s largest bookshops on the Novyi Arbat, a major thoroughfare, and is a ten-minute walk from the Kremlin. The banner did not stay up for long, but it raised the ire of liberal Russia when photographs of it were put up on the website of Ekho Moskvy, the talk radio station that is one of the few remaining independent mass media outlets in Russia, and that has offices opposite Dom knigi. The reason for liberal outrage was that the banner was titled ‘The fifth column. Aliens are among us’. Putin had used the term ‘fifth column’ a few weeks previously when he had made his speech to the Russian parliament before signing into law Russia’s annexation of Crimea. The outside world, Putin had argued, had a choice to make in Russia. It could either support Russia as it sought to develop and build, or it could support the actions of a fifth column – a disparate bunch of “national traitors”. Now a banner was being put up on a major Moscow road that identified who this fifth column was: the banner had portraits of three opposition leaders Aleksei Navalny, Ilya Ponomarev and Boris Nemtsov, and of musicians Andrei Makarevich and Yuri Shevchuk, who had criticised the annexation of Crimea. On either side of the portraits were two aliens – they had the heads of the monster from the Ridley Scott movie – dressed in suits, one of whom was holding a briefcase that had on it the white looped ribbon of 2011-2012 election protests, when protesters wore white ribbons – which Putin notoriously compared to used condoms – labelled Za Rossiyu bez Putina (For a Russia without Putin).

The Dom knigi banner was put up by an art group, Glavplakat.ru, and was probably intended as a satirical act (their website criticizes ‘traitors’ but also satirises some of the absurdities of the campaign against the ‘fifth column’; it is a marked contrast to the high-tech neo-Stalinism of the

predatel.net (traitors.net) site, which names ‘traitors’ and encourages readers to turn in ‘traitors’ of their own). Satire or not the Dom knigi banner summed up the state of Russian politics in early 2014: Russia is in the middle of a culture war. This war was declared, just like the Kulturkampf of Bismarck’s Prussia, by the political leadership. Putin has been talking up the culture war since just before his re-election to a third presidential term in March 2012. For Putin, ‘cultural self-awareness, spiritual and moral values, and codes of values are an area of intense competition’. This competition is international in its scope. The danger to Russian values comes from without as well as from a ‘fifth column’ within Russia. The struggle ‘to influence the worldviews of entire ethnic groups, the desire to subject them to one’s will, to force one’s system of values and beliefs upon them is an absolute reality, just like the fight for mineral resources that many nations, ours included, experience.’

We are all aware of some of the battles in Russia’s ‘culture wars’ because they have been played out in the Western media. The most prominent story in the Western media before the Sochi Winter Olympics and the annexation of Crimea was the Russian law on ‘gay propaganda’, with many campaign groups and prominent individuals calling for the boycott of the Sochi games over the June 2013 law against the ‘propagation of non-traditional sexual relations’ to minors. Before the June 2013 law, the main stories about Russia in 2012 were the arrest, trial and sentencing of members of Pussy Riot for their ‘punk art’ performance of their ‘Punk Prayer: Mother of God, Chase Putin Away’ in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, and the changes to laws on civil society NGOs in June 2012 that required any Russian NGOs in receipt of funding from overseas to register themselves as

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5 A video with English subtitles of the lyrics of the 'prayer' can be found at http://goo.gl/vSBTCb, accessed 12 December 2013.
'foreign agents'. Although the battles of Russia’s ‘culture wars’ are well known we have less understanding of why Putin launched them. Why did Russian politics take a ‘cultural turn’, as Richard Sakwa has called it, in 2011 and 2012? One answer to this is that the ‘cultural turn’ did not come out of nowhere, that there were elements of it in earlier Putin administrations. Indeed, conservative traditionalism was present in Putinism from the very start. In his major public statement when he became acting President when Boris Yeltzin resigned, *Russia on the eve of the millennium*, Putin had argued that ‘Another foothold for the unity of Russian society is what can be called the traditional values of Russians. ... If we lose patriotism and national pride and dignity, which are connected with it, we will lose ourselves as a nation capable of great achievements.’ Later in his first term as president, the idea of ‘sovereign democracy’ that Putin’s advisors promoted argued that Russia’s democratic standards were not comparable to those proposed by ‘universal’ (i.e., Western) conceptions of democracy.9

Tracing the lineage of the ‘cultural turn’ through Putin’s speeches and the arguments for his rule that his apologists have produced does not tell us why these themes were so much more important from 2011, however. This leads to a second answer: we might posit the development of a more

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6 “Zakonoproekt No. 102766-6. O vnesenii izmenenii v otdel’nie zakonodatel’nie akty Rossiskoi Federatsii v chasti regulirovaniya deyatel’nosti nekommercheskikh organizatsii, vypolnyayushchikh funktsii inostrannogo agenta’, http://goo.gl/suqhhx, accessed 12 December 2013. Changes to the laws on registrations of NGOs were passed in 2012 but only began to be enforced after Putin called for enforcement at a meeting with the FSB, the internal security service in February 2014. Putin’s reasoning was straight out of the ‘culture war’ playbook: ‘no one has a monopoly on the right to speak on behalf of the Russian society, especially not those structures that are directed and financed from abroad, and that inevitably serve foreign interests.’ ‘Zasedanie kollegi Federal’noi služby bezapasnosti. 14 fevralya 2013 goda’, http://news.kremlin.ru/transcripts/17516, accessed 17 February 2013.


reactionary politics in Russia as an effort to recreate an electoral majority during the 2011-2012 electoral cycle. This electoral cycle saw the end of the successful formula that Putin and United Russia had used in elections from 2003 to 2008. These elections had been won on the back of two things: the provision of political stability and, more importantly, the delivery of economic growth and rising living standards. The economic downturn that hit Russia in late 2008 and the mixed response to this by the regime weakened the eudaemonic legitimation of the regime since there was a perception, at least amongst many urban dwelling members of the new Russian middle class, that the Putin ‘model’ of economic management could no longer guarantee either their or the country’s economic fortunes. Disillusion with regime and the economic model was compounded by the delayed decision over who would run for president in 2012, by the perceived arrogance with which Putin moved the ‘reformist’ Medvedev aside from the presidency to return to the office himself, and by a general dislike for the ruling party of power, United Russia, as the partiya zhulikov i vorov (‘party of crooks and thieves’), the label given it by anti-corruption blogger and political activist Alexei Navalny in February 2011 that stuck to it through the electoral year of 2011, and that was reinforced by people’s experience of electoral corruption in the 2011 Duma elections. Economic downturn and disenchantment plus dissatisfaction with United Russia and with the style of Putin’s return to the presidency created the toxic atmosphere that brought people on to the streets across the country, but most notably in the large demonstrations in Moscow against electoral fraud in December 2011. These demonstrations threatened the smooth running of the Medvedev-Putin handover. Although it was beyond doubt that Putin would win the presidency, it was not a given that he would do so in the first round of the elections, or at least not a given that his margin of victory in a first round would be greatly over the 50% victory margin. The protests over electoral fraud in December 2011 showed the dangers of overly blatant election rigging,

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dangers that the Kremlin was probably mindful of, having seen how electoral fraud could be a spur to protest in Ukraine during the Orange revolution.

The response from the Kremlin was to firm up the Putin vote by concentrating on a core of Putin supporters and turning the presidential elections into a ‘loyalty to Russia’ test. The Putin campaign was summed up by his giant electoral rally at the Luzhniki stadium; this was held on February 23, the ‘Day of the Defenders of the Fatherland’, the rally’s slogan was ‘Defend Russia’, and the theme of Putin’s address was that the rally and the election were about ‘people like us. ... We are prepared to work for the good of the Motherland ... [we will not allow others to] dictate their will to us, since we have a will of our own’, and ended with a rallying call ‘The battle for Russia continues, we will win’.

This campaign theme was aimed not only at rallying Putin voters to the flag, but was also a pre-emptive move against further protest. It contrasted Putin - as defender of a form of Russianness – with the opposition, which were portrayed as metropolitan and ‘cosmopolitan’, in order to disarm potential protestors, and provide grounds for the repression of opposition if it became necessary. Putin had already held the USA – and the then Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, in person – responsible for the December 2011 election protests during a meeting of the All-Russian People’s Front. The themes from these protests – foreign agents, existential threats to Russia etc., – were then carried over into post-election politics.

The electoral explanation for ‘cultural turn’ only captures one dimension of this ‘turn’. It does not tell us much about how this turn fits with the wider issues of governing Russia, and why it has endured and strengthened in the period after the elections. To unravel these questions we have to see how the ‘cultural turn’ was a response to the weaknesses that the events of 2011-2012 exposed in the management of the Russian political system more generally. This in turn requires us to have some idea of what kind of political system Russia has. There is no consensus on this, but rather

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than rehearse the pro’s and con’s of the various labels that have been attached to Russia I will just frame the argument in terms of the label that I think fits best, neo-patrimonialism. Neo-patrimonialism is inherently unstable as a socio-political form. The crisis of 2011-2012 was part of a wider crisis of Russian neo-patrimonialism, which began with the economic crisis of 2008-2009, and this wider crisis raised the prospect of an exit from neo-patrimonialism. Even though this prospect was tentative and politically stillborn, it made it necessary to develop a set of broader arguments for stability to re-establish some order in the Russian neo-patrimonial system. The ‘cultural turn’ does this by creating a particular rhetoric of reaction. This rhetoric of reaction, a term is being borrowed from Albert Hirschman (and some of the categories that Hirschman identified as common to reactionary rhetoric will be used later),\textsuperscript{15} narrows the range of possible political action that can, from the regime’s point of view, be ‘legitimate’, whilst at the same time not proscribing the basic structures of economic and political management that have been used under Putin since 2000. The cultural turn, the drawing out of what is imagined to be the distinctiveness of Russia and Russian civilization in comparison to the ‘West’ and to Europe in particular, has thus contracted the possible solutions to neo-patrimonialism in Russia so that Putin’s electoral advantage has turned into a form of political stagnation.

**Neo-patrimonialism and instability**

The concept of neo-patrimonialism is resurgent in post-Soviet studies.\textsuperscript{16} The attraction of using the term is that it is a broader description of hybridity than terms such as electoral authoritarianism. Concepts like electoral authoritarianism look at hybridity at regime level only. They look at the


tension between accessing power through elections and ruling through authoritarian practices and are overwhelmingly concerned with the prospect of regime change and the issue of whether electoral or competitive democracy will replace electoral or competitive authoritarianism. Neo-patrimonialism is concerned with hybridity at a broader level than regime politics; it recognizes that there are multiple tensions within a polity at regime and state levels, and also between them.

Neo-patrimonialism does not describe a particular institutional order as hybrid like electoral authoritarianism do, or a definite state of affairs within a polity in terms of rights and obligations of citizens, arrangements of social groups or economy, levels of democracy or autocracy. The core of a neo-patrimonial system is that within it patrimonialism, personal claims to power, ties and relations, is complemented, complicated and conflicted by impersonal institutions, which have some existence independent of individual political actors. These impersonal institutions are most notably a bureaucratic state machinery, the development of which pushes a part of the state away from personal relations toward more enduring hierarchies based on impersonalism; and impersonal market economic exchange, which adds additional channels to wealth to the personalised access to resources through the machinery of a state constructed around its leader(s). Neo-patrimonialism is thus a politico-economic system that is made up of conflicting modes of organization and domination, and their legitimation, rather than a particular institutional, social or economic order.\textsuperscript{17} How and in what combination these conflicting modes of organization and domination, and their justification are co-joined, and what leads to their conjunction, is a matter of material conditions and pressures, but also of political choice and organization. This means that neo-patrimonial systems can contain a wide range of personalised and formal institutions, of patronage and bureaucratic hierarchy, and of particularistic economic exchange in which access to resources is influenced by personal ties.

and relational capital is of paramount importance, and impersonal market economic exchange and organization where access to resources is more open and influenced by impersonal considerations.

Since it does not have a particular set of institutional or organizational forms, neo-patrimonialism is best conceived as a space in which rulers try to ensure the continuity of their power. Figure 1 maps out the space that neo-patrimonialism occupies between personal and impersonal modes of political legitimation, and between closed, personal access to economic wealth and more open, impersonal market forms. Neo-patrimonial polities may take different political and economic institutional forms within this space according to their particular combination of different organizing and legitimating principles and forms of domination. What unites neo-patrimonial systems is not any common institutional design but the fact that first, the combination of patrimonial with bureaucratic forms of organization, of personalism with impersonalism, means that within them regime (essentially the rules that manage access to power) and state (the institutional locus of
power) as forms of domination are not easily reconciled, and second, and because of this, there is a high degree of uncertainty about the future. The rules on access to power – the regime – are essentially personalistic, although they may exist alongside what should be impersonal rules on accessing power where there are organizational structures like political parties or some constitutional requirement for elections. The existence of such impersonal rules for accessing power alongside a personalist system may complicate the consolidation of a stable regime. A regime is consolidated and stable when elites achieve a set of rules on accessing power that they cannot change without incurring a disproportionate cost to themselves. The existence of impersonal rules on accessing power alongside personalism influences the cost of trying to change how power can be accessed and by whom since such rules can create avenues for contesting who holds power, and can give opportunities to develop broader supporting constituencies for a challenge to personalism than can be developed through personalist patronage networks. This creates uncertainty over how power can be accessed and held onto. This uncertainty is compounded by the fact that in the neo-patrimonial space predominately personalist politics exist alongside and are interwoven with larger administrative systems that have features of a modern bureaucratic state. This state (including those personalist political actors who are its functionaries) has to perform wider functions than just satisfying the needs of the ruling group or groups and simply securing their hold on power by providing external security and suppressing domestic opposition (although it does that too). It has to provide some level of welfare to the wider population, either through redistribution or by securing some acceptable level of economic activity and perhaps growth. This has two implications.

First, the state’s essential legitimation and form of domination are impersonal. It has to have some autonomy from private interests, or at least be able to claim to have such autonomy, in order to perform its functions and provide security and welfare, whether that welfare be in the from of redistribution or provision of an environment that enables economic growth. Developing such autonomy requires that the state can claim that its operations are rational-legal, rather than personal and particularistic, since its
provision of welfare and security have to be justified as serving common interests rather than private ends.

Second, the development of the state is a more complicated process than the creation of a regime. A regime may be consolidated, as we have said, where elites achieve a set of rules on accessing power that they cannot change without incurring a disproportionate cost to themselves. State building is consolidated when officials have the ability and resources to perform state functions of maintaining order and security. The consolidation of a state is thus a far more difficult thing to achieve than the consolidation of a regime since managing the classic state functions of social order and national security involves questions of borders, citizenship, and the establishment of new forms of economic exchange and rules to govern them. A regime may be consolidated before a state develops that can resolve the problems of post-communist reconstruction and fulfil the classic functions of a state easily.

If this occurs, the question before a regime is can it contain and ameliorate the problems of reconstruction and maintaining social order and national security in such a way that it can survive ruling through a weak state (i.e., one that cannot resolve post-communist transformation or traditional state tasks)? If a regime cannot contain or ameliorate the pressure to build-up the state some other way (for example by gaining aid or security guarantees from other states) then it will come under pressure to evolve further so as to facilitate the development of the state, to compensate for the weakness of that development, or to find new ways to substitute itself for state development. Where this pressure exists and is not responded to the long-term viability of a regime will be open to question. The viability of a regime in these circumstances may be called to question from below or from within the state as pressure to take action, or to reduce in someway the problem that in other polities be dealt with through a stronger state, grows in reaction to perceived threats to the interests of state officials and to their ability to perform basic state functions of maintaining order and security. Regime members may try to fix access to power and resources through agreements with one another. However, they cannot be certain that they can maintain the arrangements that they make or the power bases that allow them to make these arrangements, since the state might encroach on these power bases (such as patronage
networks) in order to fulfil its functions (by curtailing corruption, for example, in order to improve state revenues that can be used for social consumption). Uncertainty for regime members is heightened by the fact that they cannot always be clear what the motive is behind any encroachment on their arrangements. The interleaving of regime members and their clients through the administrative system means that it is hard to discern what is a move to increase the functionality of the state and what is a power grab by some other elite group or member. Likewise, state officials interested in working to fulfil the state’s functions cannot be sure that they will be able to do so without encountering some regime member’s interests and opposition, that there will be the resources to complete their tasks, or that their actions won’t be seen as hostile to some powerbroker even when they are not.

Political development in a neo-patrimonial system is shaped by the difficulty of producing a functional relationship between regime and state, and the high degree of uncertainty that this produces. Much of the literature on change and neo-patrimonialism is concerned with how the state-regime/formal-informal tensions can lead to collapse and to regime change.\(^\text{18}\) This is the extreme end of change in a neo-patrimonial system, however, and should not lead us to ignore the fact that neo-patrimonial systems are always struggling to manage the tensions that they contain. Tension in the development of a neo-patrimonial polity is, crudely, over first, whether a regime can be consolidated through elite agreement, and second, whether a regime can develop enough state functionality, or be able act as a substitute for the state, sufficient to provide for security and deal with pressure to deliver welfare. The uncertainties of neo-patrimonialism mean that there will always be competing interests within the neo-patrimonial polity that will seek to push it towards one of the four corners of Figure 1 to manage the uncertainty that is characteristic of the neo-patrimonial space. Regime formation and its stability can contain these tensions by making the costs of acting to reduce uncertainty to high for a group, but over the longer term there also needs to be state functionality, or regime substitution for a functional state formation, to insure

\(^{18}\) For example, Bratton, M. and N. van de Walle, ‘Neopatrimonial regimes and political transitions in Africa’, *World Politics*, 1994, 46, 4.
neo-patrimonial system stability and so that any exogenous shocks that neo-patrimonial regimes are not very good at dealing with, can be contained.

If a stable relationship between regime and state formation does not develop it is an open question of which of the forms of domination in neo-patrimonialism will shape its development. Will the personalist, patrimonial regime increasingly dominate state and market, or will impersonal bureaucratic or market structures moderate personalism? In the terms outlined in Figure 1, the choice is roughly between moving up to the top of the figure, to a position where state dominates regime, or moving down to the bottom of the Figure, to a system where regime dominates state. If the former it may be possible to reduce uncertainty for state officials so that the state can become ‘developmental’, concerned with the provision of economic growth for a wider spectrum of society, rather than constrained by elite interests. If the latter the result will be personalist political power and/or elite control over the market that limits economic distribution through the state and the wider functionality of the state in favour of satisfying particular interests.

Movement in any of these directions, and even contradictory movements, is always possible as a neo-patrimonial system tries to deal with pressures for change. Sources of change can be exogenous or endogenous. External actors such as international organizations might, for example assert pressure on a neo-patrimonial polity by insisting on greater respect for impersonal electoral rules, or insist in the adoption and enforcement of policies (such as competition policies) that circumscribe elite rent-seeking. Similar pressures might come from within the neo-patrimonial polity as a result of elite conflict, social pressure, or because, and there is some need to develop state capacity (by building up revenue for example) that requires some alteration in the relationship between patrimonial political structures and agents, and functional bureaucratic state. These pressures need to be managed so that they are not destructive of neo-patrimonial stability or so that such destruction is handled in a way that enables a peaceable movement from the neo-patrimonial space to one of the corners of Figure 1. Getting out of the neo-patrimonial space to a corner of Figure 1 will mean a decrease in uncertainty about the future for some leader, faction, element of the state bureaucracy, or social group. There will be leaders and factions who seek to
maximise their patronage and personal powers at a cost to the wider state, and leaders, factions and bureaucrats who want to constrain particularistic interests to push development towards some political end or have development steered by market rationality so as to increase the state’s functionality, its ability to deliver security and welfare. There will also be social groups who support these leaders and their ideas in the hope that they might deliver economic growth, redistribution, or opportunity. There are thus, at least potentially, wide and diverse political and economic interests at work within a neo-patrimonial polity. Stability in a neo-patrimonial system requires that none of these interests gain too much leverage to enact its project and move the polity out of the neo-patrimonial space to one of the corners of Figure 1. What movement towards the corners of Figure 1 would entail is sketched out in Figure 2. This gives an abstracted overview of what forces might seek to move in which direction, what such a movement would entail and what it might require minimally to be a successful movement to some form of developmental state, to some form of ‘traditional’ patrimonialism as originally described by Weber (bottom left of Figure 1), or to what Schlumberger has called patrimonial capitalism (bottom right of Figure 1), where market instruments are adopted, usually because of external pressures, but the terms on which these instruments work are set by local elites who subvert them to their material advantage.19

Delineating these interests and pressures conceptually, even if they may be indivisible in reality in any particular neo-patrimonial system, can help us appreciate the essential contradictions of neo-patrimonial systems, the problems that they have aligning different forms of domination, the compromises between regime politics that are highly personalised and the existence of a bureaucratic state and formal constitutional structures, and the difficulties involved overcoming these compromises. Not all of these interests and pressures need exist within a neo-patrimonial system, or if they do exist they may do so in combination with one another. Political leaders might move

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**Figure 2** Exits from the neo-patrimonial space

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movement toward patrimonialism</th>
<th>Actors and motivation</th>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Conditions for ‘successful move’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leader and/or elite faction seek sees possibility of supplanting other leaders and/or elite groups to become hegemonic. May be opportunistic or to resolve contest for power and achieve security of tenure</td>
<td>Suppression or co-option of elite groups by core ruling group/leader; Hollowing out of state and attenuation of market mechanisms in favour of personal political and economic control.</td>
<td>Low level or containable demands from society on state so that the hollowing out of formal bureaucracy by personal rule does not create a societal backlash; Private economic interests weakened so that they can be co-opted into personal rule or marginalized.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movement toward patrimonial capitalism</th>
<th>Actors and motivation</th>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Conditions for ‘successful move’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leader and/or elite faction seek economic advantage through economic liberalization. May be due to exogenous pressure and/or response to failure of economic management.</td>
<td>Economic management through state replaced by market mechanisms that operate only insofar as they do not gainsay elite interests; Elite secures control of commanding heights of the economy and secures rents through politically sheltered private economic activity.</td>
<td>Low level or containable demands from society on state and market so that the development of market in favour of elite does not create a societal backlash; Contest over state resources as liberalization unfolds does not lead to unmanageable elite conflict.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Movement to developmental authoritarianism</th>
<th>Actors and motivation</th>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Conditions for ‘successful move’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leader and/or elite faction seek to force pace of economic development through increased bureaucratic control of economy. May be in response to state crisis/social pressure for growth.</td>
<td>Suppression of private economic activity and autonomy, in particular in areas such as investment, in favour of bureaucratic direction; Politicised (‘ideological’) notion of development established as basis for bureaucratic autonomy from some elite interests.</td>
<td>Societal and elite demands for resources either through investment in favoured projects or welfare largely ignored by bureaucracy so that particularistic interests should be constrained; State develops capacity to control social and elite backlash against curbs on consumption required to fund development.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movement to developmental democracy</th>
<th>Actors and motivation</th>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Conditions for ‘successful move’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leader and/or elite faction seek to force pace of economic development through combination of bureaucratic management of the economy and private economic activity. May be in response to state crisis/social pressure for growth, likely to be backed by exogenous pressure.</td>
<td>Development of bureaucratic capacity and autonomy from most private elite interests; Changing composition of elite as market empowers new actors; Develop claim that administration of economy is through neutral rational-legality rather than ideology.</td>
<td>Societal and elite demands for resources either through investment in favoured projects or welfare largely ignored by bureaucracy so that particularistic interests should be constrained; State develops capacity to control social and elite backlash against changes in allocation of resources that marketization produces.</td>
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from one position to another or attempt to combine elements of them as they try to both reduce their current uncertainty and secure their future over the longer term. This will reproduce neo-patrimonialism and its uncertainties either through a stop-start process of political and economic development, or because no clear direction of movement can appear and the neo-patrimonial system muddles through.

**Neo-patrimonial instability in Russian politics**

Russia’s development as a neo-patrimonial system was contingent on its Soviet heritage and post-Soviet aspirations. Neither formal nor informal institutions and patterns of domination have been able supplant the other so that Russia remained within the neo-patrimonial space. Uncertainty about the future has therefore been a constant of Russia’s post-communist experience, although this uncertainty was moderated for a time in the 2000s by the consolidation of the regime and its substitution for state functionality. There is not the space here to go through all the twists and turns of the development of neo-patrimonialism in Russia, but we can map out the main direction of development.

The Soviet Union had a particularly patrimonial form of communism, where personalism and clientelism significantly, and simultaneously, undercut and supported the formal bureaucratic hierarchies of the party-state, Russia should have become a democratic developmental state based on bureaucratic impersonalism and market organization if it had managed to change as market reformers had initially intended. However it did not have either of the conditions listed in Figure 2 for making such a move. The state could not constrain particularistic interests by ignoring societal and elite demands for resources either through investment in favoured projects or welfare, and the state did not have and could not develop the capacity to control social and elite reactions to changes in resource allocation that marketization should have produced. At the same time there was no force that could move Russia to any of the other exits from the neo-patrimonial space

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described in Figures 1 and 2. Social demands for welfare and the entrenched power of economic interests meant that there was no chance of moving to either developmental authoritarianism, that was blocked by the power of local economic interests that had de facto privatised much of Russia’s economy at the end of the perestroika period, or to some form of patrimonialism, which would have undercut the state so that it could not deal with social needs. Structural and political factors therefore meant that reform and state building could never be fully completed or compromised, but at the same time the failings of reform meant that the state building was undermined by informality. El’tsin coped with the failure to break out of the neo-patrimonial space through compromise and the development of his personal power as arbiter between elite factions.21 This weakened state capacity and bureaucratic autonomy as the incorporation of elite factions into the administration created overlapping institutions at the centre so that there were no clear lines of authority or responsibility in central government administration and policy making,22 and led to the fragmentation of the national politico-administrative space as regional elites structured local political systems to their own advantage.23

The weakening of state capacity had limits, however, so that there was never a drift to full patrimonialism. Personal and informal politics weakened the state and its functionality, but strong pressures to preserve something of its functionality meant that it could not be hollowed out completely to become just a vehicle for the private interests of elite members. These pressures had multiple sources. In part they were structural and Soviet era legacies. State functionality had to be maintained to some degree because of the security needs of the Russian state; the Russian state could not be reduced to a simple coercive shell that protected a rapacious elite through domestic repression since it has been faced with multiple foreign policy and security problems, such as dealing with its position as a hegemon in the post-Soviet space, which require the preservation of state capacity. Social expectations have also called

22 Huskey, E. Presidential power in Russia, Armonk, NY, M.E. Sharpe, 1999.
for some continuation of state capacity. These expectations were both domestic and international. Internationally, the idea held by many Russians that Russia should be ‘great’ has required state capacity, so that structural pressures to react to foreign policy problems is socially reinforced. Domestically, Russia could not fully amend Soviet era welfare policies, many of which required state provision and regulation. This is not, of course, to say that the Russian state dealt with either security or welfare issues well or effectively. The point is that even though access to power became increasingly to lay through personal ties under both El’tsin and Putin there was never a complete compromise of the state and its functions.

Crisis and political developments from the 1990s never fundamentally changed the balance that had developed regime and state because, as Russia lurched from crisis to crisis, the tendency was for alignment of the needs of power holders with some requirements for state development so that Russia’s position in the neo-patrimonial space was managed and reproduced. This was because developing state capacity has also been a way of securing personal rule for all of Russia’s presidents. Consequently the development of personalist patterns of domination has not been separated in practice from the extension of notions of bureaucratic and state autonomy. We can see this, for example, in the moves made by El’tsin in the 1997 to restore state finances. Reform of the tax system and development of state capacity to collect tax in 1997 was designed to secure revenue for the state so that it could continue to perform the weak social management functions that it was engaged in (Easter, 2102, 138). Enacting this reform required a restructuring of government so that the state could become more autonomous of powerful social interests, something that El’tsin highlighted as a problem in his 1997 state of the union address. The restructuring of the government should have weakened oligarchic interests and increased El’tsin’s power since the new government contained more economic liberals, and they were dependent on El’tsin’s patronage because of their lack of a social support base. This worked to counterbalance the authority of the Prime Minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin, and made the government more dependent on El’tsin at a time when his authority had been compromised by his health issues. A ‘necessary’ set of actions to deal with the fiscal crisis of the state and put in place revenue...
streams that would enable it to perform its basic functions and reproduce itself supported personalism in the form of El’tsin’s control over elite factions, and vice versa was supported by personalism. There was little prospect of El’tsin’s actions taking Russia out of the neo-patrimonial space as a result, but there was, at least temporarily a rearrangement of the relationship between powerful factions within it so that the tensions between state and regime could be managed, albeit not very effectively.

The same admixture of the patrimonial development of personal rule and the development of formal structures marked the development of Putin’s political authority after 2000. Action against oligarchs and regional leaders, and Putin’s efforts at developing the capacity of the Russian state through the reassertion of its monopoly rights over violence, developed his personal/patrimonial powers but was supposed to have impersonal state building results so that it is impossible to separate the two or see if one has more importance as motive than the other. The curtailment of oligarchic encroachment on the state that Putin ordered at his famous July 2000 meeting with the oligarchs furthered the goal of separating the state from economic interests that El’tsin had raised in 1997. The limitations on the exercise of power by regional leaders addressed the fragmentation of the national political and economic space in Russia, a fragmentation that should also have been lessened by the development of the state’s coercive capacity. Western and Russian observers had identified all of these actions as necessary to deal with the problem that weak state authority posed for the democratisation of Russia in the 1990s.24

These actions did not lead to Russia exiting the neo-patrimonial space, however. Putin’s actions developed the state’s coercive capacity, but this did not alter its capacity in other sectors to any great extent. Putin’s actions were, overall, another realignment of the balance of forces and interests within Russia’s neo-patrimonial space, rather than a break with it. The polity became more patrimonial as Putin more closely controlled factional conflict through

the presidency and because of changes to elections, something we will discuss below. State functionality was maintained because of economic growth and a closer bureaucratic management of the economy. This management of the economy was tied to a political vision for economic development, but only weakly, and proprietary office holding was not curtailed at all to push Russia towards a form of developmental authoritarianism. The encroachment of proprietary office holding on the commonwealth was held in check not by the extension or improvement of formal political mechanisms and bureaucratic routine, but symbolically, through Putin’s charisma. Whilst the allure of Putin’s charisma might be a mystery to many in the West, it was a factor in Russian politics as Putin was turned by Kremlin campaigns, and in parts of the popular imagination and culture, into the guarantor of in the final instance of the rectitude of the Russian state. There is some argument as to how far Putin’s popularity was a result of the promotion of his charismatic qualities, and good evidence to suggest that economic results were as important to Putin’s popularity as the promotion of his cult. Nevertheless, Putin’s character, perceived competence, and vitality have all been attractive features to Russia’s voters from before the Russian economy began to recover, setting him apart from the corruption and incompetence of the El’tsin presidency. This characterization of Putin was assiduously promoted both positively, through media campaigns that showed him as a multi-faceted man of action and problem solver, and by denying the oxygen of publicity to other politicians who might challenge Putin in terms of charisma.

Under the umbrella of Putin’s charisma and his symbolic defence of the formal political order, increased bureaucratic management of the economy was a re-alignment of private and bureaucratic interests rather than a move toward more economic management by the state for clear developmental goals, whether democratic or authoritarian. Overall, developing regime strength substituted for state development so that the tension between state and regime lessened.

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somewhat, with social welfare provided for as a spillover from oil-fuelled economic development rather than as a result of state policy or better state management of the economy. Russia thus stayed in the neo-patrimonial space despite Putin’s increasing personal power and increased bureaucratic control over the economy. Putin, as has been mentioned, had notions of Russian economic development based on a more directed and statist economy, and the state did not develop the capacity to control elites or society more broadly to control consumption in favour of directed economic investment. But particularistic interests trumped state needs and functionality as long as their political loyalty was not an issue. Where it was an issue (or was claimed to be an issue) they were repressed and this repression was justified by appeals to the larger, universal needs of Russia, and using ‘legal’ means (courts and judicial processes). Informal and formal powers therefore backed each other up. Otherwise signs of patrimonialism such as corruption remained high, especially as societal checks on them from the media and civil society organizations were weakened as the quest for political stability saw their diminution. Overall, and not surprisingly, there was no improvement in the governance of Russia over the course of Putin’s administration. This is illustrated in Figure 3, which shows selected governance indicators from the

Figure 3 Governance in Russia (selected World Bank Governance Indicators)


World Bank for Russia from 1996 to 2012 (the last date available). Only indicators for areas to do with economic governance, not political openness or stability are shown. The scale runs from -2.5 to 2.5; for comparisons sake a country like Ireland would score around between 1.3 and 1.8 on these measures, as would most economically advanced established liberal democracies. There were improvements in Russia’s governance indicators when the chaos of the El’tsin period ended and when Medvedev took over from Putin, but generally these were brief improvements and the affect of leadership change soon ended and governance worsened again.

Only one-way out: the crisis of neo-patrimonialism and the ‘cultural turn’

Remaining in the neo-patrimonial space meant that Russia’s stability during the Putin years was a façade. Underneath this façade there were political undercurrents that sought to push it towards one of the solutions to neo-patrimonialism as outlined in Figure 1. There was also the possibility of the mismanagement of the neo-patrimonial space leading to a social reaction to neo-patrimonialism if people felt that it was not providing sufficient state functionality, or if they felt that their rights were being too grossly infringed upon. This was the lesson that Putin and his entourage drew from the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004: it does not take a great deal of organization to turn the mismanagement of part of the neo-patrimonial system into a struggle between the formal and informal elements of this system. The changes to the political and electoral system that Putin made during his first presidential terms headed off protest from the electoral system, controlled labour disputes and weakened new unions, and put in place mechanisms such as the youth movement Nashi to control grassroots mobilization. But despite these measures, protest remained as a latent force in Russia during 2000-2008. After 2008 it moved from latency to visibility as protests increased, with the demonstrations during the electoral cycle of 2011-2012 the final stage in this movement.

The reasons for this shift in protest were that the substitution of regime strength for state functionality became an issue after 2008, and became an issue in a way that ruled out a move toward democratic developmentalism. There were two reasons for this. First, the ‘Tandemocracy’ of Putin as Prime Minister and Medvedev as President after March 2008 highlighted the distinction between formal and actual power. Medvedev had formal power as President, but actual power lay with the more charismatic Putin. Second, the economic crisis that hit Russia in the autumn of 2008 highlighted for many the limited functionality of the state to build a modern economy, hemmed in as it was by the informal politics of the regime. On their own these issues may not have been too politically unsettling to the Russian neo-patrimonial system. But together they were politically toxic because of the way that Medvedev tried to move Russia toward democratic developmentalism. The failure of this showed the limited extent to which Russian neo-patrimonialism could adapt, and ruled out its adaptation towards democratic developmentalism.

Medvedev had come to the presidency promising to launch a ‘modernization’ of Russia. This promise had Putin’s support in early 2008, as Putin launched the policy himself with a development plan for Russia to 2020.\textsuperscript{31} Essentially, at this point, modernization was synonymous with diversification of the economy away from overreliance on energy exports. Modernization promised a more directed role for the state in the economy, but this was in line with Putin’s general position that the state should aid development in Russia in order to make it great. There was no immediate threat in this to the stability of neo-patrimonialism. Putin’s development plans favoured existing industrial structures and allowed regional authorities to access off budget funds for local projects.\textsuperscript{32} Modernization thus looked a means of transferring resources to the existing economic structure so that it replicated itself and continued to provide support for the regime.\textsuperscript{33} Although

\textsuperscript{31} Putin, V.V. ‘Speech at expanded meeting of the State Council on Russia’s development strategy through to 2020’, Johnsons’ Russia List (e-mail version), 2008, 29, 11 February 2008.
\textsuperscript{33} Makarenko, B. ‘Vozmozhna li v Rossii modenizatsiya?’ Pro et Contra, 2008, 12, 5-6.
this version of modernization would have required some change in the economic role of the state as an investor it would not have impacted existing interests without some compensation. Any threat to neo-patrimonialism would have been at some future, unknowable date, and would depend on modernization changing the relative economic power of sectors of the Russian economy.

This was to change as the economic crisis bit. Medvedev linked the experience of crisis both to the structure of the economy, which had been Putin’s reason for introducing modernization, but also argued that dealing with this was a political problem that required institutional change and would entail a shift away from the neo-patrimonial space. Documents and proposals from the Institute for Contemporary Development (INSOR, seen as Medvedev’s think-tank) or Medvedev’s ‘Go Russia!’ or his 2010 blog on political reform, all linked crisis to political reform. Medvedev and INSOR argued that although ‘many crisis problems have been “extinguished” with money from federal budgets, their resolution had been set to one side. The result is a provisional stabilisation without modernisation; the crisis cannot break through institutional barriers’. The solution to this was to enact political reform that would increase the state’s capacity to regulate the market neutrally. Medvedev and INSOR’s proposals all argued for a move towards a developmental state based on bureaucratic impersonalism and market exchange. The three conditions for successful modernization, INSOR argued, were first, improving democracy to reduce ‘policy mistakes’ and avoid the ‘catastrophic’ risks that are often associated with authoritarian modernization policies. Second, improving Russia’s ‘human capital’, which would involve not just better public goods provision but a ‘dialogue with "consumers”, recording their objective interests and subjective evaluations of social justice’, so as to avoid the kind of social protests that had followed top-down reforms such as the efforts to ‘monetize’ benefits in 2005. And third, a freeing of business and

35 INSOR Obretenie budushchego, pp. 79, 222.
‘citizen activism’ from bureaucratic interference, whether from ‘above’ or from corruption from below. Securing these changes to effect institutional reform would, it was recognized, involve conflict. Moving resources from commodity sales from consumption to investment would impact rent-seeking and proprietary office holding. The conflict of bureaucratic particularistic interest with general social interest would have to be ended by institutional change and the imposition of the rule of law, and were a matter of political will.\(^3\)

Medvedev’s ideas never gained traction within the political system. Although parts of the Russian elite may have been favour of them, there was no groundswell of support for them so that the costs of pursuing them were clearly high. Putin stayed largely above the political debate on Medvedev’s proposals. This may have been because he did not support them, although he did express support for the general goals of economic diversification, or because he wanted to see how much support they had before committing himself to them. Either way, his quietude on the issue of political change supporting economic development increased the sense that there was no consensus on change so that pursuing it was going to have uncertain pay-offs. The contrast between the bureaucratic rationality that underpinned the Medvedev proposals looked to many as though they were a challenge to the charismatic foundations of Putin’s popularity and authority. Institutional reform, in other words, looked like a challenge to Putin because it would relocate the guarantee of political rectitude away from the person of Putin and try to vest it in legality and rational-legal practice. Supporting Medvedev therefore looked to many as if it were a challenge to Putin as he attempted to create a political personality of his own in what was seen by many as a ‘silent war’ with Putin and the control that he exercised informally over the factions within the Russian polity.\(^4\) This heightened uncertain over the prospects of Medvedev’s policies from within the Russian political system. If, as it looked, support for Medvedev meant a challenge to Putin the costs of support would be immediate because of Putin’s control over informal politics and were calculable (the fate of previous within-system challengers to Putin was a known). The benefits of supporting Medvedev were very much in the future,

\(^3\) INSOR Rossiya XXI veka, pp.10-12.
and potentially meant a loss of access to resources needed to support one’s political position. This is a common problem with reform that aims to promote bureaucratic reform and legality as a public good, as Barbara Geddes has argued; ‘administrative competence is an especially costly form of collective good to most politicians because ... politicians in unreformed systems rely on access to state resources to build support organizations, and administrative reform threatens such access.’\(^38\) Circumstances reinforced the perception of the dangers of reform. The conflict that the changes proposed by Medvedev and INSOR would have involved would have been difficult to bear during an economic downturn such as Russia experienced from the autumn of 2008 onwards. Once the economic downturn had bottomed out, as it did from the middle of 2009, and growth was restored to the economy from 2010, it was too late in the electoral cycle to take chances such as Medvedev/INSOR proposed. Politically, therefore, Russia stagnated even as its economy recovered in 2010-2011. There were some small efforts at pushing the modernization agenda forward such as the removal of state officials from the boards of state companies, but these were half-hearted.

Political stagnation meant that Putin and Medvedev were unable to deal with the growing protests that came with economic downturn and the exposure of the contradictions of Russian neo-patrimonialism that the tandem produced. Protest often focussed on the discrepancy that has to exist in a neo-patrimonial system between formal rules and informal practices. Protests grew from 2009 onwards, both because of economic slowdown (for example, the Vladivostok car dealers protests of 2010), and over political issues (for example, the Strategiya-31 movement – Strategy-31 – which protested for the right to protest under Art.31 of the Russian Constitution; they demonstrated illegally on the 31st of the month), and over local environmental issues that became politicised (for example, the Khimki Forest Defense Movement). Finally, there were popular protests, most famously the Obshchestvo sinyikh vedyorok (Society of the Blue Buckets, who protested official traffic lanes and congestion) that were aimed at elite privilege and at the failure of the state to deal with specific problems. Some of protests, such as the Pikalyovo

demonstrations against a factory closure in 2009, could be resolved by Putin’s personal intervention, but this was not a strategy for dealing with the larger issues that were surfacing with Russian neo-patrimonialism. Even as the economy recovered the relationship between state and regime needed to be addressed. The weak response from Putin and the political system generally to the Medvedev/INSOR agenda meant that there was little chance of moving to democratic developmentalism. Moving towards authoritarian developmentalism was a non-starter for the same reasons. Diverting resources from consumption to investment ran the same risks of creating divisions over rent distribution within both the polity and society as the Medvedev/INSOR modernization route out of neo-patrimonialism. Increasing the wealth and autonomy of elite groups and members, in effect a move towards greater patrimonial capitalism, was equally a non-starter. The problem, as protests were highlighting, was weak state functionality so that a further decrease in that functionality would have been like fighting a fire by pouring on gasoline. One of the reasons that Russians did not universally applaud economic recovery after 2009 was the perception that anti-crisis measures had overly favoured Russian economic elites, at least in their initial stages. Further concessions to them and compromise with them was politically dangerous, and anyway was not necessary; they had little room to manoeuvre and support the opposition due to the changes in the political system that Putin had introduced in 2000-2008.

This left only one option for dealing with crisis: restore Putin’s dominance of the political system unequivocally and find a means of rebuilding trust in the state despite its continued lack of functionality. This could be done partly by Putin’s return to office and the recombination of his charismatic authority with formal power. Charisma alone, however, was not likely to be enough given the damage that the downturn in the economy and protest were doing to Putin’s prestige. Moreover, the decision to return Putin to office was not a straightforward one. Putin and Medvedev prevaricated – publically at least – in 2010 and the first ten months of 2011 over what was going to happen in the 2012 presidential elections. This just compounded uncertainty about the direction in which Russian neo-patrimonialism would develop and made it harder to take difficult political and economic choices
such as would have been necessary to move to some form of developmental state. Uncertainty over what direction Russian neo-patrimonialism might take became confused with the issue of a second-term for Medvedev, and over what vehicles electoral activity would be organized through, and by whom. The creation of the All-Russian People’s Front at the start of May 2011 at Putin’s behest seemed to point to Putin’s return to office and the extension of United Russia as an organization through the Front, which was supposed to ally United Russia with civil society, business and labour organizations. But then Medvedev took over as chair of United Russia at its XIII congress at the end of March. This indecisiveness and to-ing and fro-ing over the succession went until Putin’s September 2011 announcement that he would run for the presidency, not Medvedev.

Once the decision to replace Medvedev was made, the ‘cultural turn’, and the ‘culture wars’ that came with it, could develop. As we saw above, this had electoral benefits for Putin as the ‘cultural turn’ talked to a core electorate. But the ‘cultural turn’ is more than this; it was not something that could be set aside once the elections had run their course because it was more than a simple tool to rally voters to the flag. The ‘cultural turn’ and the promotion of a conservative traditionalism have powerful stabilizing properties for Russian neo-patrimonialism. The ‘cultural turn’ works on several levels. It does this through creating a rhetoric of reaction in Russian politics. This rhetoric is Putin’s, he is the chief articulator of the turn. This makes something of his charisma for a new presidential term(s?). The crisis of 2008-2012 showed the limits of the old neo-patrimonial system and Putin could not go back and reforge the successes of the past; a new presidential term had to have a goal and the ‘cultural turn’ provided this. Putin’s spokesman, Putin’s spokesman, Dmitri Peskov, speaking to Russian television just after Putin’s re-election, summed this up: according to Peskov, Putin’s ‘first [presidential] term was resuscitation of the country, the second term was rehabilitation, and now begins physical and spiritual development of the country, its economy and its every single region.’ The nature of the rhetoric of reaction is, however, that it is almost without content. It has created a statist project for Russia without

actually doing anything about the state as a bureaucratic order that should be functional. Partly this is because the ‘cultural turn’ is very vague. Putin is not someone much given to speaking about ideology. One of the other statements in his millennial document is that he does not believe that Russia should have a ‘state ideology’. He has been consistent in eschewing the idea that his pronouncements amount to an ideology and on what the sources are behind his thinking. Putin is only not vague in his cultural conservatism in one area: his critique of the dangers of action. This is what creates Putin’s rhetoric of reaction and makes it work as a means of stabilizing neo-patrimonial politics in Russia.

**Putin’s rhetoric of reaction**

According to Albert Hirschman, reactionary rhetoric takes one of three forms: perversity, futility, and jeopardy. Each of these argues against change rather than for some particular course of action. Reactionary rhetoric is designed to limit the field of possible political action and agency, to promote the continued existence of a state of affairs. To this end reactionary rhetoric serves up warnings about the outcomes of change, whether that change be revolutionary or reformist. Each form of reactionary rhetoric does this in a particular way, although they can be used in conjunctions with one another. The perversity argument states that an attempt at change will produce the opposite result to what was intended. The classic arguments that Hirschman analyses to show this are the arguments about the French revolution that point out that the attempt by revolutionaries to create ‘fraternity, liberty and equality’ ended up producing the opposite, dictatorship, so that it would have been better to leave French society slowly evolve, as many claim it was doing before the revolution, to something better. The futility argument argues that change is pointless not because it will not actually change anything at all of any substance. The example that Hirschman uses here are the arguments against the extension of political rights, which some claimed, is futile because of the tendency of societies to be dominated elites. Extending democratic rights, the argument goes, does not change this, politics is still dominated by elites, so rights are meaningless. The third argument proposes that change is
not futile but actively dangerous since it puts in jeopardy something that is valuable. The argument that Hirschman uses to illustrate this type of reactionary rhetoric are the criticisms that have been made of the extension of social welfare rights in democratic societies, which it has been argued, imperil economic and democratic vitality by distorting labour markets and the relationship of citizens to political authorities by making them dependent on power for welfare.\footnote{Hirschman, \textit{Rhetoric of reaction}.}

Putin, in a novel fashion, uses all three of these arguments. The starting point is that for Putin, Russia is unique as a civilization.\footnote{Most of what follows is a recreation of the arguments that Putin has put forward over the last couple of years in a series of speeches and interviews. The key texts are the articles that Putin published in Russian newspapers just before the 2012 presidential election, his two addresses to the Federal Assembly in 2012 and 2013, his Valdai speech in September 2013, and his interview with Channel One and Associated Press news agency in September 2013. All of these, apart from the articles, can be found on the Russian presidency webpages at http://news.kremlin.ru/transcripts, direct quotes will be referenced below.} There is nothing particularly striking about this claim, it is an empirical one: all countries are to some degree unique because of their particular histories, geographies and experiences. However, Russia is different to other places, according to Putin, because of the character of its civilization and because of the extent to which it has kept this civilization in recent times. Russia, for Putin, is a ‘state-civilization’.\footnote{See in particular, Putin, V.V. ‘Zasedanie mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba “Valdai”. 19 sentyabrya 2013 goda”, http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/19243, accessed 25 September 2013.} By this he means that there is a close alignment between Russia’s ability to exist as a state and as a civilization; each depends on the other; without the state there would be no civilization, and without the civilization, there would be no state.\footnote{This is a common idea in Russian historical thought and dates back to Slavophile thinkers. See, for example, Danilevskii, N.I. \textit{Russia and Europe. The Slavic world’s political and cultural relations with the Germanic-Roman West}, Bloomington, Slavica, 2013, the original of which was produced in part form in the 1806s.} The strength of a state is a function of how strong its civilizational identity is. This identity is a resource, one that needs to be protected so that the state can survive, and one that the state has to protect so that it can survive. The character of this civilization is essentially a religious one, but it is not totally determined by one religious denomination. Although the main source of Russian civilization is Christian Russian orthodoxy, something that Russia shares with Belarus and Ukraine, Russia’s ‘state-civilization’ is not underpinned by Orthodoxy alone. Russia’s ‘state-civilization’ is not underpinned by Orthodoxy alone. Russia’s ‘state-civilization’ is not underpinned by Orthodoxy alone.
‘state-civilization’ is formed because Orthodoxy and the other religions that are present inside the territory of Russia are joined by a common concern for the preservation of traditional moral values. This enables Russia to exist as a multi-faith society and a multi-ethnic society. The dominant values are Orthodox and Russian, but the other faiths fit with Orthodoxy and coexist with it to support the state. There is no room or need for them to propose state missions of their own in the form of separatist projects, because their core moral concerns are already addressed in the larger Russian Orthodox faith. As a result they are subsumed in the greater Russian ‘state-civilization’ and have not (and cannot and should not) develop state-bearing cultures of their own.

The task of the Russian state is to protect Russia as a ‘state-civilization’. This Putin argues has never been more necessary than at the present. Other ‘state-civilizations’ are giving up and debasing the traditional values that they once had. This is because of globalization, on the one hand, particularly cultural globalization, and because of their abandonment of traditional values. The key danger is the latter. Putin acknowledges that there has always been competition between states, of which globalization is just the latest form. However, globalization is different to previous types of competition because it is not just military or economic, it is also ideational. Population movements and the attempts to deal with them have given rise to multiculturalism. This multiculturalism is not based on any organic intellectual foundations like the mixture of religions that underpin Russia’s ‘state-civilization’. It is instead founded on abstract principles, like the idea of ‘tolerance’, which Putin argues, are ‘neutered and barren’. As a result, Putin argued in his address to the Federal Assembly in 2013:

Today, many nations are revising their moral values and ethical norms, eroding ethnic traditions and differences between peoples and cultures. Society is now required not only to recognise everyone’s right to the freedom of consciousness, political views and privacy, but also to accept without question the equality of good and evil, strange as it seems, concepts that are opposite in meaning. This destruction of traditional values from above not only leads to negative consequences for society, but is also essentially anti-democratic, since it is carried out on the basis of abstract, speculative ideas, contrary to the will of
the majority, which does not accept the changes occurring or the proposed revision of values.\textsuperscript{44}

The last part of this quote is important. Putin is not rejecting ‘democracy’, but claiming to be its truest representative, articulating a truly populist position that is more in tune with societal aspirations than anything that can be uncovered through an electoral system, especially where elections, such as to parliaments, are designed to secure representation of sectional interests, i.e., fractions of the people that destroy representation of the majority. Putin is putting himself above such elections as President and representative of the majority, which, of course, is opposed to the erosion of traditional values. In this way Putin sets his version of democracy against the forms of democracy that are most common in Europe. Not surprisingly Putin also argues that the erosion of traditional values is especially advanced in Europe, which thereby stands in stark contrast to Russia.\textsuperscript{45}

Putin’s view of Russia underpins his rhetoric of reaction in several ways. First, it frames how he sees past attempts at changing Russia. These attempts at change are framed through the lenses of both perversity and futility. The perversity argument is deployed to argue that previous attempts at change had unintended consequences so that they led to the opposite of what they proposed. Such change occurs when the hold of the civilizational identity that underpins the state is weakened. The metaphor that Putin uses is a medical one. ‘State-civilization’ is a form of immunity that keeps at bay revolutionary and reformist ideas. These ‘… are always some kinds of bacillus that destroy this social or public organism.’ When ‘immunity decreases … millions already believe that things cannot get any worse, let’s change something at any price, we shall destroy everything there, “we shall build our new world, and he who was nothing will become everything.” In fact, it did not happen as one wished it to be.’ Change meant that the ‘loss of the state self-identity both during the Russian Empire’s collapse and during the Soviet


\textsuperscript{45} ‘Behind the “failure of the multicultural project” is a crisis of the very model of the ”national state” – a state that was historically constructed exclusively on the basis of ethnic identity. And that is a serious challenge that both Europe and many other regions of the world will encounter.’ Putin, V.V. ‘Russia: the ethnicity issue Prime Minister Vladimir Putin’s article for Nezavisimaya gazeta. Jan 23 2012’, http://archive.premier.gov.ru/eng/events/news/17831/print, accessed 13 January 2014.
Union’s breakup was disastrous and destructive’. The chief culprit in this was the elite, in particular the intelligentsia, which was keen to ‘emphasise their civility, their level of education; people always want to be guided by the best examples’. The result was copying from abroad, which was tantamount to opposing Russia (this Putin neatly justifies with a quote from Pushkin to prove that he is not anti-intellectual just anti-intelligentsia).\textsuperscript{46} Equally dangerous and perverse is the threat of ‘mono-ethnicism’, which for Putin is any attempt to put the interests of ethnic Russians above those of the broad set of inter-religious traditional values that join different ethnicities and religionists in the Russian ‘state-civilization’. Putting one nationality above another, Putin argues, ‘was the formula used by those who paved the way to the collapse of the Soviet Union’, and stands in contrast to the longer-standing cultural values of Russia that have been reaffirmed over the centuries. Promoting ‘Russia first’ simply opens up the floodgates to competing claims to sovereignty as it did when the USSR collapsed, and is anyway a Western idea too since it is based on ‘the notorious concept of self-determination, a slogan used by all kinds of politicians who have fought for power and geopolitical dividends, from Vladimir Lenin to Woodrow Wilson’.\textsuperscript{47} There is what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have called a logic of equivalence at work here. Although many nationalists and liberals would see themselves as poles apart in Russian politics, they are, Putin argues, essentially the same. They both work from abstractions and as a result the differences between them ‘cancel each other out insofar as they are used to express something identical underlying them all’, namely their opposition to the true values of Russia’s ‘state-civilization’\textsuperscript{48}

The outcomes of change driven by the intelligentsia (and by them Putin seems to be referring more or less exclusively to liberals and to the cosmopolitan left) and by nationalists are not simply perverse, they are also futile. Although previous reform and revolutionary changes have been destructive, as when people’s natural immunity was reduced at the end of


\textsuperscript{47} Putin, ‘Russia: the ethnicity issue’.

Tsarism and during the collapse of the USSR, the change that was wrought after these collapses was in the end incomplete because of futility. Putin’s claim that change has been futile is implicit; the futility of change is not automatic for Putin as it is in the reactionary rhetoric that Hirschman analysed. This is a rhetorical trick that Putin plays, but it is an important one. If change were futile because it can never overcome Russian traditionalism then it would not be existentially dangerous; change could happen and those bits of it that fit with traditional values would endure and others would be of no account. Moreover, if change were not futile then it would have already altered Russia, changing its ‘state-civilization’ into something else, something not ‘traditional’ and organic, but a pastiche of old and new. So, Putin implies, change has been futile in the past because Russia still exists, but at the same time change is dangerous because there is no longer any guarantees that change will be rendered futile by the resurgence of traditional values. There is, for Putin, a difference between the past and the present. In the past, competition between cultures was not as intense as it is now and it did not so clearly involve the transfer of ‘ways of life’ from one place to another. The signs of this for Putin are many: ‘global development is becoming increasingly contradictory and dynamic’; the very idea of ‘soft power’ ‘implies a matrix of tools and methods to reach foreign policy goals by exerting information and other levers of influence’ that uses ‘illegal instruments’ ‘to manipulate the public and to conduct direct interference in the domestic policy of sovereign countries’.49 Globally, the result for Putin is that ‘supposedly more progressive development models’ have been pushed on countries and have, as after the Arab Spring, brought chaos and bloodshed.50 This theme was, of course, repeated in the wake of the Maidan demonstrations in Kiev, alongside the idea that Ukraine was a part of the wider Russian ‘state-civilization’, an idea that Putin had promulgated before the demonstrations that had lead to the fall of the Yanukovych regime, and that was central to the Eurasian Union project.51

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According to Putin, the ‘future Eurasian Economic Union, which we have declared and which
Since change can no longer be relied on to become futile it threatens jeopardy; it will damage rather than restore the Russian state. The cultural ties that bind Russian people are, for Putin, weaker than they have been before, a fact that he believes is shown by Russian’s tolerance of ‘corruption, brazen greed, manifestations of extremism and offensive behaviour’. Traditional values can no longer be relied on to renew themselves as they have in the past, because they are not a finite resource in the current global order. This Putin has argued on several occasions, is the lesson that has been learnt over the course of Russia’s post-communist history and as Russia has dealt with competition from abroad: ‘we eventually came to the conclusion that there are no inexhaustible resources and we must always maintain them. The most important resource for Russia’s strength and future is our historical memory.’ The fact that the ‘Russian people are state-builders, as evidenced by the existence of Russia’ remains true, but the ‘cultural code’ that has historically underpinned state building has been attacked ever more often over the past few years; hostile forces have been trying to break it, and yet, it has survived. It needs to be supported, strengthened and protected.

From this brief survey we can see that Putin’s ‘cultural turn’ towards conservative traditional values is almost relentlessly negative. The only positive thing that Putin recommends is the preservation of Russian culture and its increased celebration and use in education. This has led, amongst other things, to calls for new school texts, the establishment of a Military-Historical Society with the involvement of the Minister for Culture, more celebration of Russian feats of arms, including new war memorials and more prominence given to Russia’s part in World War I, the recreation of the Gotov k trudy i oborone (Ready for labour and defence, a physical and ideological fitness programme originally launched by Stalin in 1931, that ran throughout

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we have discussed extensively as of late, is not just a collection of mutually beneficial agreements. The Eurasian Union is a project for maintaining the identity of nations in the historical Eurasian space in a new century and in a new world. Eurasian integration is a chance for the entire post-Soviet space to become an independent centre for global development, rather than remaining on the outskirts of Europe and Asia. Putin, ‘Zasedanie … kluba “Valdai”’.

54 Putin, ‘Russia: the ethnicity issue’.
the rest of the Soviet period) programme in March 2014, as well as the persecution of those who are clearly defined as not part of Putin’s community of values: the ‘disparate traitors’ of the ‘fifth column’, the liberal intelligentsia with their tendency to cringe culturally before the West, ethno-nationalists, and, of course, most famously in the West, Russia’s LGBT community. But ultimately, the result of the ‘cultural turn’ is symbolic, rather than administrative, politics. The organization of the state is not brought into question by the ‘cultural turn’ and policy, outside education and physical fitness, and ‘lifestyle’ politics, is barely mentioned within the frame of the ‘cultural turn. Negativity is key to the support that the ‘cultural turn’ gives to Russian neo-patrimonialism. It denies political agency to any group or interest that might seek one of the exits to neo-patrimonialism. Liberal or nationalist projects are perverse and may lead to the final eradication of the Russian state as the embodiment of a particular ‘civilization’. All that stands between this final eradication of Russia as a ‘state-civilization’ is Putin and the link that he has to the people who share his traditional values. The end result of the ‘cultural turn’ is thus that Putin’s charisma is revitalised by its association with a particular view of what Russia is and should be, and what it should be protected against. Moreover, there can be no encroachment on this charisma by appeals to state reform through the development of legal-rationality. The functionality of the state cannot to be measured simply in material terms anymore, but in spiritual ones. The yardstick of the Russian state’s success has gone back to Fyodor Tyutchev’s famous lines:

Умом Россию не понять,  
Аршином общим не измерить: 
У ней особенная стать —  
В Россию можно только верить.

Russia cannot be understood by reason,  
No standard gauge can measure her:  
She stands alone, unique -  
One can only believe in Russia.

**Conclusion**

Putin’s ‘cultural turn’ and the culture wars that have resulted from it have stabilised Russian neo-patrimonialism. Events in Ukraine, and the way that they talk to Russian nationalism, have helped this along. The longer-term – although how long this longer-term will be no one knows – prospects of this
are not, however good. Putin, to paraphrase Alexander Gerschenkron’s critique of nineteenth century Russian populism, has raised ‘the paradoxical claim that the preservation of the old rather than the easy adoption of the new constitute[s] the “advantages of backwardness”. The result [is] a tragic surrender of realism to utopia.’\(^5\) In Putin’s case this is because the new is hard to adopt, but overall Gerschenkron’s criticism holds. The increased reliance on charisma and its association with the rhetoric of reaction may legitimate Putin’s rule and stabilise Russian neo-patrimonialism by limiting the range of action that be taken to get out of it. This, however, comes at a cost. The surrender of realism to the idea that Russia is protecting a mythical civilization, its new utopia, means that governance will remain stuck in the rut that it has been in for the last twenty years. In the absence of an agenda for change the Russian neo-patrimonial system will not collapse, but neither will it develop. It is no surprise that one of the other themes of Russian politics over the last few years has been the idea of a return to zastoi, stagnation, the name that Gorbachev gave the sclerosis that overtook the USSR under Brezhnev.\(^6\) The motor of zastoi was something remarkably like the ideas that underpin the ‘cultural turn’; then the idea was that the Soviet way of life was best, an alternative modernity to that of the West, and that this needed to be protected and extended through patriotic education. The result, however, was neo-traditionalism and the extension of corruption through routinization. In the Brezhnev era, this routinization occurred ‘when charismatic organizational leadership c[ould] no longer identify a compelling transformation task, define it strategically (not merely symbolically), and mobilise significant sections of


the organization around both task and strategy.’ Putin may, for now, have found a task and a strategy in Ukraine and in the foreign policy problems that the events in Ukraine create. But the struggle for Ukraine won’t last forever. When it ends Putin will have to deal with Russia’s problems at more than the symbolic level of the ‘cultural turn.’

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