

Russia the Harbinger: Gangsterism, Global Putinism, and the Crisis of the West

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Abstract

The chaotic and dysfunctional politics of the post-Soviet Russia of the 1990s and the early 2000s was viewed at the time as a transition phase on the path to liberal democracy. But in fact, Russia's trajectory turned out to be something else entirely: a harbinger of where politics in at least some parts of the West were heading. Without the Soviet Union to embody the authoritarian threat, faith in the importance of liberal democracy became hollowed out. In the absence of the gravitas of the Cold War, politics became tabloidised, trivialised, and gamified – and Russia figured out how to hack the game. Through a campaign of active measures, political interference, and weaponised corruption, the Kremlin has aimed to export this model to advance its geopolitical agenda.

Putinism and Our Altered Consciousness

Sometimes, whether out of arrogance, carelessness, or the irresistible urge to be a troll, your adversary does you the favour of saying the quiet part out loud. This was certainly the case back in February 2019 when longtime Kremlin aide Vladislav Surkov published a widely circulated article in the Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* titled “Putin’s Long State”. In his essay, Surkov made three broad arguments:

- Democracy is an illusion and works in the West only because people believe the illusion that they have choice.

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- Putin has created a system that can rule Russia for 100 years, if not longer, because he understands the “algorithm” of the Russian people – indeed, Surkov claims that Putin’s Russia is the fourth manifestation of the Russian state, following Ivan III, who expanded the Grand Duchy of Muscovy, Peter I, who established the Russian Empire, and Vladimir Lenin, founder of the Soviet Union.
- Putinism – with its stress on sovereignty, populism, traditionalism, and patrimony – is the ideology of the future and will challenge liberal democracy for supremacy (Surkov, 2019).

And then he dropped this gem of a quote:

Foreign politicians accuse Russia of interference in elections and referendums across the globe. In fact, it is even more serious – Russia is interfering with their brains, and they do not know what to do with their own altered consciousness. Since the failed 1990s, our country abandoned ideological loans, began to produce its own meaning, and turned the information offensive back on the West. European and American experts began to err in their political forecasts more and more often. They are surprised and enraged by the paranormal preferences of their electorates. Confused, they announced the invasion of populism. You can say so, if you have no other words. Meanwhile, the interest of foreigners in the Russian political algorithm is understandable – there is no prophet in their homelands, and Russia has long ago prophesied everything that is happening to them today (Surkov, 2019).

This was not simply a case of the famously mischievous and provocative Surkov having a little fun. Articles like this, written by senior Russian officials, and appearing in major publications, do not appear by accident. This was a forthright description of how the Russian elite views its conflict with the West and an expression of confidence that it is winning.

The Russian Political Algorithm

Surkov is hardly a random commentator. He has served as a senior aide to every post-Soviet president. As first deputy Kremlin chief of staff during Putin’s first two terms, Surkov masterminded the system that became known alternatively as “sovereign democracy” or “managed democracy”.

This post-modern version of authoritarianism took on the external forms and ceremonies of liberal democracy but twisted these into

Potemkin institutions controlled and manipulated by an overbearing executive. Its signature components included de facto state control of most electronic media, demonstrably sham elections, fake political parties, the subordination of the legislature and judiciary, regime-controlled youth groups, and government-organised non-governmental organisations, or GONGOs.

This Russian domestic political system that Surkov helped create, was, in essence, a mockery of Western democracy: deploying diversion, dramaturgy, disinformation, lawfare, and strategic corruption to maintain the continued rule of Putin and his oligarchic clique.

Peter Pomerantsev described Surkov's role as follows:

Surkov has directed Russian society like one great reality show. He claps once and a new political party appears. He claps again and creates Nashi, the Russian equivalent of the Hitler Youth, who are trained for street battles with potential pro-democracy supporters and burn books by unpatriotic writers on Red Square. As deputy head of the administration he would meet once a week with the heads of the television channels in his Kremlin office, instructing them on whom to attack and whom to defend, who is allowed on TV and who is banned, how the president is to be presented, and the very language and categories the country thinks and feels in (Pomerantsev, 2014, p. 67).

This is Surkov's "algorithm of the Russian people" and understanding its logic is essential to understanding not only post-Soviet Russia—but ultimately what ails the post-Cold War West. The system Surkov built has evolved (or devolved) over Putin's quarter century in power. For Putin's first two terms, it maintained the external facade and the theatre of democracy, albeit in a tightly stage-managed form, as a facade to conceal oligarchic rule. Scholars describe such regimes as "competitive authoritarianism" (Levitsky and Way, 2020).

Beginning with Putin's third term, in 2012, Russian politics took on a more explicitly autocratic, repressive, and personalised form. The mask came off and the system began to resemble what political scientists call "consolidated authoritarianism" (see Gawryluk, 2021; Hawn and Tack, 2021) or what Russian political analyst Andrei Kolesnikov (2022) dubbed "hybrid totalitarianism".

And as for the claim from Surkov (2019) about 'the interest of foreigners in the Russian political algorithm', the pattern has been replicated to varying degrees in various contexts, where once-healthy democracies backslid into

more authoritarian models: in Victor Orban’s Hungary, in Robert Fico’s Slovakia, in Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s Turkey, and in Narendra Modi’s India. During its eight years in power from 2015–23, Poland’s Law and Justice party seized control of that country’s judiciary, public broadcasters, cultural institutions, and companies, but was defeated at the polls.

Moreover, commentators are increasingly noting the beginnings of a similar authoritarian shift in the United States. In June 2025, Russian émigré human rights activists Maria Kuznetsova and Dan Storyev published an op-ed in *The New York Times* titled, “Here’s What’s Happening in America, in Six (Mostly) Russian Terms”, in which they admitted to feeling a sense of déjà vu.

We both grew up in Russia in the early 2000s and lived through the country’s gradual slide into authoritarianism under President Vladimir Putin. In our 20s we started working in human rights. Now we live abroad, knowing that a return to Russia would almost certainly mean jail. Over the recent months we have been noticing something worrying: The same markers of authoritarianism we know from our youth have been appearing in America (Kuznetsova and Storyev, 2025).

The authors cite several Russian concepts that now have fledgling American counterparts. Most notably: the “power vertical”, Putin’s highly personalised, top-down, executive-dominant system of governance and the “siloviki”, the security service and military officials who make up the backbone of the Kremlin regime (Kuznetsova and Storyev, 2025).

The New York Times published a lead editorial asking: “Are We Losing Our Democracy?” on October 31st, 2025. To address the question, the Times editorial board comprised what it called a ‘list of 12 markers of democratic erosion’ including the stifling of dissent and speech, the persecution of political opponents, bypassing the legislature, using the military for domestic control, defiance of the courts, the declaration of national emergencies under false pretences, the vilification of marginalised groups, attempting control of the mass media and universities, the establishment of a personality cult, the use of political power for personal profit, and the manipulation of the law to retain power (The New York Times Editorial Board, 2025). The editorial concluded: “The United States is not an autocracy today. It still has a mostly free press and independent judiciary, and millions of Americans recently attended the “No Kings” protests. But it has started down an anti-democratic path, and many Americans – including people in positions of

power – remain far too complacent about the threat’ (The New York Times Editorial Board, 2025).

The chaotic and dysfunctional post-Soviet Russia of the 1990s and the early 2000s was viewed at the time as a transition phase on the path to liberal democracy. But in fact, Russia’s trajectory turned out to be something else entirely: a harbinger of where politics in at least some parts of the West were openly flirting with an alternative model of authoritarian governance.

In an interview for the 2015 PBS Frontline Documentary “Putin’s Way”, political scientist Karen Dawisha, author of the book “Putin’s Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia”, noted that the central mistake Western policymakers and analysts made about post-Soviet Russia. ‘Instead of seeing Russia as a democracy that was in the process of failing, we needed to see it as an authoritarian system that was in the process of succeeding’, she said (Dawisha, 2015). We now live in a world where Russia is in the process of exporting that system, with varying degrees of success. It is a world where every social and political division in the West – whether over race, religion, region, history, gender, sexual identity, migration – is a potential wedge that Moscow will seek to exploit to undermine faith in democratic governance. It is a world where every election in a liberal democracy is a potential crisis. And it is a world where some Western governments – in Hungary, Slovakia, and the United States – are repeating Kremlin talking points and imitating Kremlin tactics.

The Crisis of the West and the Plot Against Liberal Democracy

As Putin consolidated and expanded his power at home in the first quarter of the 21st century, he was not just establishing an autocratic kleptocracy and attempting to restore an empire, he was also tapping into emerging global sentiments: distrust of institutions and anxiety about social, economic, and demographic change. It is not exactly an ideology, but sadly it has widespread appeal. Starting in 2012 or 2013, Putin and the Russian elite set about taking its authoritarian model global. And the ground was fertile. In many ways, Moscow was pushing on an open door with the West experiencing its most acute crisis of confidence in at least a generation.

The 9/11 attacks and their aftermath, the Iraq war and subsequent upheaval in the Middle East, the 2008 financial crisis, the subsequent Euro crisis, the migrant crisis, and the Covid-19 pandemic have all fed into this

angst and malaise. The economic and cultural shocks of globalisation have caused a critical mass of citizens in the West to become alienated and disenfranchised. Advances in technology have put us at the mercy of algorithms that maximise and amplify outrage and turn that outrage into dollars. Without the Soviet Union to embody the authoritarian threat, faith in the importance of liberal democracy became hollowed out. In the absence of the gravitas of the Cold War, politics became tabloidised, trivialised, and gamified. And Russia figured out how to hack the game.

Many are now saying that Western institutions are broken and liberal democracies dysfunctional. Many believe that Western liberal democracy is no longer working for them and they are seeking alternatives. The liberal democratic model of governance that appeared so triumphant and invincible three decades ago is today beleaguered and on the defensive. Populism, xenophobia, and authoritarian attitudes are sweeping Europe and North America. The United States is polarised, mired in political tribalism, and plagued by low public trust – its politics paralysed to the point of dysfunction. So deep is the disillusionment that according to a 2016 study, the share of young Americans who say it is absolutely important to live in a democratic country has dropped from 91 percent for those born in the 1930s to just 57 percent for those born in the 1980s (Mounk and Foa, 2016; Taub, 2016).

As Michael McFaul, who served as US President Barack Obama's Ambassador to Russia, noted in an article in *The Atlantic* (2025), Putin understands that 'if the Cold War's central ideological struggle of communism versus capitalism was between states, this new ideological struggle of illiberal nationalism versus liberal internationalism is being fought primarily within states'. The fact that the Putin regime has long been attempting to export its governing model has hardly been a secret. Larry Diamond, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, wrote in *The Atlantic* in December 2016 that Putin had effectively launched 'an opportunistic but sophisticated campaign to sabotage democracy and bend it toward his interests, not just in some marginal, fragile places but at the very core of the liberal democratic order, Europe and the United States'. Diamond added: 'We stand now at the most dangerous moment for liberal democracy since the end of World War II' (Diamond, 2016).

In this regard, Moscow has been working to exploit and leverage divisions in an increasingly polarised West by deploying influence operations to inflame the culture wars in the United States and the battles over immigration and multiculturalism in Europe. A 2013 report by the

Kremlin-connected think tank The Centre for Strategic Communications, published a report recommending that Moscow seek to exploit divisions in the West over racial divisions, feminism, multiculturalism, and LGBTQ+ rights. According to the report, as the West becomes increasingly multicultural, less patriarchal and traditional, and more open to gay rights, Russia should act as a lodestone for those who oppose these trends (Whitmore, 2013).

Commenting on the report, the Russian political analyst Aleksandr Morozov drew a direct comparison to the Soviet-era Comintern, or Communist International, which sought to unite Western leftists behind the Kremlin's agenda. According to Morozov, 'it is a mistake to believe that Putin wants to lower a new Iron Curtain, build a new Berlin Wall and pursue a policy of isolationism. On the contrary, Putin is creating a new Comintern. This is not isolationism, but rather the maximum Putinisation of the world. The Comintern was a complex system that worked with ideologically sympathetic intellectuals and politicians. What we are seeing now is not an attempt to restore the past, but the creation of an entirely new hegemony' (Morozov, 2013). Unlike in the Soviet period, this would be attempted by uniting the anti-establishment far right behind the Kremlin. In a 2016 article, Peter Pomerantsev wrote that Putin had become 'the Che Guevara of the right', noting that 'for the "anti-establishment" Right, giving Putin the thumbs-up has become the equivalent of what pulling on a Che T-shirt has long meant for the Left'.

In the years that followed The Centre for Strategic Communications' report, Russia launched what can only be described as a non-kinetic guerilla war against the West that included several vectors: disinformation campaigns, election interference, support for separatists and xenophobic parties and movements, cyberattacks, strategic corruption, and stealth investments aimed at establishing pro-Moscow networks of influence. It included interfering in the 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK, the 2016 US presidential election, the 2017 French presidential election, and the 2017 German general election, just to name a few. Romania's Constitutional Court annulled that country's December 2024 presidential election after far-right candidate Calin Georgescu's shocking first-place finish in the first round. The court's decision came 'amid accusations of Russian interference, suspicious TikTok accounts and secret payments to online influencers' (Ings, 2025).

It also included an emerging alliance between Putin's Kremlin and high-profile figures on the Western far right, such as Tucker Carlson in the

United States, Nigel Farage in the United Kingdom, and Marine Le Pen in France. Along these lines, Russia enthusiastically supported, and sometimes financed, European populist and anti-immigrant parties such as the National Rally in France and the AfD in Germany. It has also backed white supremacists, neo-confederates, and state-level secessionist movements in the United States (Michel, 2021).

In the globalised world that has emerged in the post-Cold War environment, Russia has also used institutionalised graft and weaponised corruption as a conveyor belt for Russian malign influence abroad. In a 2012 report for Chatham House, James Greene explained how Putin has weaponised Russia's institutionalised corruption by turning it into an "extension of his domestic political strategy" of using the carrot of corruption and the stick of kompromat "to establish patron-client political relationships". According to Greene, 'by broadening this approach to the corrupt transnational schemes that flowed seamlessly from Russia into the rest of the former Soviet space – and oozed beyond it – Putin could extend his shadow influence beyond Russia's borders and develop a natural, captured constituency' (Greene, 2012).

The Rise of Gangsterism as Governance

Russia has multiple strategic goals behind its assault on Western liberal democracy. Primarily, it seeks to weaken and divide the West, both within countries and among members of the European Union and NATO, to prevent a unified front that would prevent Moscow's dominance of Ukraine and other parts of the former Soviet space. Electoral interference, disinformation campaigns, support for separatism, and exasperating wedge issues all work to advance these goals. A second goal is to undermine the post-Cold War international order by subverting a law-based system and replacing it with one in which great powers control spheres of influence and small nations enjoy limited sovereignty at best.

But underpinning these goals is the objective to promote and spread a system of governance that Moscow sees as an alternative to liberal democracy. In a 2021 article in *Lawfare*, Matthew Murray, Alexander Vindman, and Dominic Cruz Bustillos write: 'Politically, the Kremlin is driven to legitimise this kind of state-sponsored oligarchy at home by exporting and embedding it abroad as an alternative to democracy'. Such 'a systemic level of corruption', they write, 'places Putin's Russia in an increasing state of

tension with the Western neo-liberal order' (Murray, Vindman, and Bustillos, 2021).

The current Russian system emerged as a result specific conditions in that country, including:

- The fall of Marxism-Leninism as a ruling ideology, which in addition to precipitating the fall of the Soviet Union, also removed any ideological or institutional constraints on the exercise of power in Russia.
- An attempt, albeit half-hearted, to set up democratic institutions in the 1990s under the presidency of Boris Yeltsin.
- The steady erosion and corruption of those institutions throughout the Yeltsin years, beginning with the shelling of parliament in October 1993, the creation of a super-presidency, the rigging of privatisation auctions, and the establishment of oligarchic rule.
- The rapid destruction of Russia's weak institutions under Putin – including the legislature, the courts, the media, and civil society – as well as the culling, taming, and housebreaking of Russia's oligarchs, leaving him and his cabal of cronies to rule with impunity.

In the globalised world that emerged since the 1990s, they have been able to merge with international financial networks and infest Western economies and political systems.

Drawing on imperial and Soviet traditions, KGB and Communist Party leaders displayed oligarchic tendencies to survive the transition to capitalism by creating new networks of loyal patrons based on shared interests. In the early 1990s, they moved billions in state resources and financial assets abroad, privatised the most profitable enterprises for themselves and their close associates, and began engaging in criminal activity (Murray, Vindman, and Bustillos, 2021).

What do you get when you have a ruling clique and no institutions to hold them accountable? First you get oligarchy, the unaccountable rule of the few. And then you get Gangsterism, in which this oligarchy is made monolithic and is dominated by one ruling clique. To paraphrase Lenin, Gangsterism is the highest stage of oligarchy. Recent articles by the author in *The Bulwark* and *The National Interest* outlined the seven tenets of Gangsterism as governance (Whitmore, 2024a; Whitmore, 2024b).

- Governance by a small cabal of elites and their cronies that relies on a web of patronage networks to enrich itself and maintain and exercise power outside formal, legal, and Constitutional institutions.
- A ruling elite that is willing and able to use extrajudicial force, including lethal force, to protect its interests, and eliminate threats real and imagined, at home and abroad, and is capable of doing so without accountability or fear of reprisal.
- A state structure that is characterised by weak and feeble institutions, officially sanctioned kleptocracy, the preponderance of unwritten and informal rules, roles, and codes, and an absence of the rule of law.
- A political regime that is defined by an impulse to expand and control markets and territory and is convinced that such expansion is essential for its survival because the existence of the rule of law near its borders threatens its survival.
- A regime that uses corruption as an instrument of statecraft with the aim of co-opting, controlling, bribing, and blackmailing allies and adversaries both at home and abroad.
- A regime that uses geopolitical extortion as an instrument of statecraft by stoking instability in neighbouring countries as a pretext for intervening to establish order, thereby functioning like an international protection racket.
- A regime that cloaks and justifies its predatory goals in grandiose rhetoric about traditions, values, religion, and history.

This is what we got in Russia once the independence of all the institutions – the legislature, the civil service, the courts, the media, the universities, civil society, were debilitated, enfeebled, and eroded. This is what governance without accountability looks like. And this is the political algorithm Putin’s Russia is seeking to export to the West.

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