

Adjustment in Putin's state: under the banner of conservatism

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On 12 December President Vladimir Putin made his annual speech at the Federal Assembly which is an important political signal to the elite. The essence of this year's speech was the need to strengthen and stabilise the model of power which Putin has been forging since his ascent to power and which in recent years has encountered a series of economic, political and social challenges. The main lines of the speech resonate with the direction the Kremlin has taken over the last year and which may be described as an authoritarian adjustment to the system. This adjustment is focused on a further centralisation of power (limiting the autonomy of courts and local authorities), the strengthening of the president's 'tough-line' support base (including the Investigative Committee), the disciplining of the state administration which shows signs of dissent, and the harassment of political opponents. Putin's model of power is based on an ideology which refers to traditional and conservative values. However, rather than reflecting the views of the elite, it is instead an instrument used to stigmatise opponents who challenge the present model of power.

The political counter-reform

The last two years have brought a series of challenges for Putin's system of power – stammering economic growth, social unrest, signs of dissent in the administration. The Kremlin has not however responded to this by political and economic reforms but by attempts to perpetuate the present model. A clear counter-reformist trend has been visible in Putin's annual speech and in recent measures undertaken by the Kremlin. Measures are being taken to further centralise the country and to extend the competences of the bodies which represent the foundation of Putin's "tough line".

According to a law initiated by the Russian president, the Supreme Arbitration Court was incorporated into the Supreme Court. This means that an in fact relatively well-performing and transparent court established to protect Russian entrepreneurs, has been dismantled. Investigation bodies have at the same time seen their competences extended; they will be granted the right to investigate tax cases without the involvement of fiscal bodies (the draft law submitted by Putin was passed in the first reading on 10 December). It is worth noticing that investigative bodies were deprived of this right in 2011 by then president Dmitry Medvedev, which caused a six-fold decline in the number of tax fraud cases and had an important impact on reducing the administrative burden in business. The Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation, which is seen as the Kremlin's main tool to harass

political opponents, was particularly interested in extending the competences of investigative bodies.

The Kremlin also continues to take legislative measures aimed at adjusting the functioning of the system to the changing political and social situation, including the declining support for the Kremlin's United Russia party. Changes have been made to the electoral law for this purpose (the process to replace the proportional representation act with the majority-proportional act is underway)/. The government has also put forward a draft law which will make it more difficult to legally challenge election results. In his annual speech Vladimir Putin also signalled the need to reform the system of local government. The media have reported that the analytical centre ISEPI, which is close to the Kremlin and has contributed to the draft law relating to the electoral system, has already presented several versions of this reform. The one factor they all share is the proposal to scrap the universal election of city mayors. If this law enters into force, it may extend the deterioration of the autonomy of Russian regions and further warp the Russian model of federalism.

A peculiar conservatism as the foundation of Putin's model of the state

For one year now, Russia has been forging a state ideology that refers to conservative and traditionalist values and which are held up against moral changes in the West. Putin also referred to this ideology in his speech as he emphasised the importance of traditional family and spiritual values. Putin criticised the West for “reviewing moral norms” and presented Russia as the main defender of traditional values in the international arena. In the last year several laws which target “untraditional” attitudes have been passed, including the law banning the promotion to minors of untraditional sexual behaviour (this law is seen as a blow dealt to gay rights) and the law which penalises “offences to religious feelings” (aimed at the secularised opposition). Other parts of this ideological offensive include aggressive propaganda of a peculiar presentation of conservatism in the Kremlin media and also historical and educational activities. An example of such activities can be found in the guidelines for teaching history in secondary schools; these reflect the short-term interests of the ruling elite.

The Kremlin views the ideology based on conservative values instrumentally and as serving to provide an ideological background to preserve Putin's model of the state – traditionalist, top-down, centralised, and assuming an unchallenged supremacy of the presidential centre of power. The choice of this ideology is to a large extent determined by the confinement of Vladimir Putin's social support base to traditionalist and anti-Western milieux and by the loss of support from active social groups from large cities. The conservative ideology does not reflect the world view or the model of behaviour of either the elite (analysts often notice the contrast between the conduct of the elite and the rules they profess) or of society (which is far from moral conservatism). The government perceives this ideology as a weapon to stigmatise opponents who break free from the “traditional” political and social mould, rather than as a real social project.

Punishment for opponents, warnings for the support base

Restrictions against opponents have been an important element of the policy pursued by the Kremlin after Vladimir Putin's return to power. Preparations for the second trial of the opposition activist Alexei Navalny are presently coming to an end. This time he is charged with fraud linked to servicing the contract with the French company Yves Rocher.

The Kremlin also continues to take measures to discipline its own support base. These actions have already earned the tag of “nationalising the elite”, which means a shortening of the leash for the interests and assets of the Russian elite abroad, thus reinforcing their dependence on the Kremlin. As part of this campaign Russian officials were prohibited from having foreign bank accounts in 2012 and supervision of their properties abroad was cranked up. In his speech Putin announced that the process of de-offshoring – imposing taxes on revenues generated by Russian companies registered in tax havens but operating in Russia – would continue. Although it seems doubtful whether it is possible, this demand reveals that the Kremlin is seeking to increase its supervision of the financial interests of the elite. Putin also mentioned a transaction by the state-owned giant Rosneft to acquire shares in TNK-BP, made via a tax haven. Rosneft is run by Igor Sechin, one of Putin's closest aides. This may be seen as a signal that attempts to increase supervision will also affect Putin's most trusted allies who have accumulated huge capital and gained important influence through their connections to the president.

The president has also issued a warning to a part of the elite which indulges itself with a small degree of autonomy, including making reservations about the Kremlin's “tough course”. An example of this is the shutdown of the state-owned information agency *RIA Novosti* on 9 December and the establishment of the media holding *Rossiya Segodnya* which will be led by controversial journalist Dmitry Kiselyov. The Kremlin has scrapped a state-owned agency which was seen as being loyal to the government but simultaneously as having quite high standards of reporting. Instead, a new standard of journalism has been set by promoting Mr Kiselyov who is considered a fervent executor of the Kremlin's propagandist instructions and who is known for his exceptionally controversial statements (including comments on Ukraine, the Russian opposition and homosexuals). And even though this change has a rather limited range, it is the most telling illustration of the Kremlin's expectations towards the elite in the economic and social situation which is becoming increasingly more complex.