Russia Beyond Putin

On June 1, 2016, **Timothy J. Colton** (Morris and Anna Feldberg Professor of Government at Harvard University) and **George Breslauer** (Professor of the Graduate School and Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost Emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley) gave a presentation on "Russia Beyond Putin," the subject of the upcoming Spring 2017 issue of *Dædalus*. The program, which served as the Academy's 2040th Stated Meeting, took place following an authors' conference for the *Dædalus* issue. The meeting included a welcome from **Jonathan F. Fanton** (President of the Academy). The following is an edited transcript of the presentations.

Timothy J. Colton

Timothy J. Colton is Morris and Anna Feldberg Professor of Government at Harvard University. He was elected a Fellow of the American Academy in 2011, and is the guest editor, with George Breslauer, of the Spring 2017 issue of Dædalus on "Russia Beyond Putin."

Looking ahead – ten to fifteen years – what can we say about the prospects for fundamental or significant change in Russia's political order? If change does occur, what can we expect in terms of the direction it will take? And what are the sources that might trigger change?

The essays discussed in our authors' workshop today for the upcoming issue of *Dædalus* will be published in 2017, which is, of course, the centenary of the Russian revolution of 1917. This is a useful reminder of the fact that change has been the rule rather than the exception in contemporary Russia in its various guises and personae: as an empire, as the Soviet Union, and now as post-Soviet Russia. What we have been thinking about in our workshop is "Russia Beyond Putin." We are asking after his reign ends – and naturally we don't know when that will be – whether it is time for those of us on the outside and for Russians on the inside to be thinking about a new or significantly different way of governing a country. It goes without saying, however, that any choice and movement on this matter can and must only be made by Russians.

We have had a government, or we may say a regime, in place now for the better part of two decades. Vladimir Putin was made prime minister in 1999 and elected president in 2000, and he is still at the top of the heap, showing no signs of stopping. But biology being what it is, and the Russian constitution, for all of its flaws, being what it is, we can say for sure that he is now on the back nine of his career as president of Russia. He served two terms as president, and then bowed out for four years and worked as prime minister while his protégé and lieutenant, Dmitry Medvedev, was president of the country for four years. Then, of course, Putin came back as president in 2012. This was permissible under the constitution, which limits a president to two consecutive terms but says nothing about what might happen subsequently. Putin could have had the constitution amended on this point at almost any time, but he has chosen not to do so. Assuming he runs for reelection in 2018, he would be able to serve a six-year term, at the conclusion of which he will have been Russia's principal leader for a quarter of a century; not much shorter than the time Joseph Stalin spent as leader.

Looking ahead – ten to fifteen years – we pose three general questions. First of all, what can we say about the prospects for fundamental or significant change in Russia's political order? Secondly, if change does occur, what can we expect in terms of the direction it will take? Western Democrats like most of us like to think that any political change anywhere has got to move toward more democracy, but a look at the headlines suggests that is not necessarily so. There's plenty of room for Russia to become more authoritarian than it is today, more autocratic; alternatively, it could move in a more democratic direction, or there is also the possibility that there will be change toward a sort of disorder or breakdown. And thirdly, what are the sources that might trigger change?

My introduction to the issue is, to some extent, a summary of the status quo: Russia is being governed in a tighter, less competitive, less inclusive fashion than it was before Putin came to power. Its recent history has been marked by stability. Previously, though, as Putin has said, Russia's twentieth century was one of turbulence and radical change: a popular revolution, a civil war, a revolution from above culminating in terrible purges, a devastating foreign world war with a foreign adversary that killed almost thirty million people, de-Stalinization, the ups and downs of the Brezhnev period, and then Gorbachev's well-intentioned efforts at reform that did some very good things, but also led to the breakdown of the Soviet Union as a country. In the decade after the Soviet Union fractured, Boris Yeltsin tried to build democracy and radical market reform overnight, but had limited success dealing with the problems that Russia faced. As Putin saw it, Russia in its most basic sense was greatly diminished by the breakup of the Soviet Union. And he was convinced from the beginning that unless compensating steps were taken, the new Russia had a good chance of suffering the fate of the Soviet Union by entering another cycle of decline.

And so Putin stepped into a very difficult situation, wanting to deal with Russia's problems in a different way, and he seems to have known pretty well in advance what he wanted to accomplish. As I have said, he wanted to bring about stability, which had been sorely lacking in the fifteen or so years before, and he had a particular lever for bringing stability about, and that was, of course, the state. So it was his mission in life, and I think it remains his mission today, to rehabilitate and consolidate the Russian state. And in strengthening the state, I think Putin, in fact, was much more concerned with strengthening particular parts of the state than dealing with the state as a whole. Those parts were principally the central government: Russia is a country of regions and he wanted to strengthen the center as opposed to the periphery, and at the center, in Moscow, he strengthened the executive branch at the expense of the legislature. Many of the particulars, I think, are pretty well-known: the second war in Chechnya, which Russia eventually won, the appointing of the so-called *siloviki* (individuals from the secret services and other agencies of that kind) to watch over the civilian bureaucracy, fixing the state's budget problems, enlarging and enriching the government civil service, and exercising control over Russia's new borders.

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And during his first two terms as president, he was entitled to view these as very successful political accomplishments, if we are to use electoral success as a measure of that. After his second term, he handed over power, in a limited sense, to his lieutenant, Medvedev. Until that point, he had one enormous asset – an economic boom – in addition to the fact that Russians tended to judge him in comparison to his predecessors, who were understood to be lacking. The economic boom was facilitated by the bull market for Russia's principal economic asset: oil. The new government actually managed the economy reasonably well and I think its macroeconomic policy was quite prudent, on the whole, and enlightened. And so the wind was certainly in his sails, until roughly 2009–2010, when problems started to accumulate, but I won't dwell on the particulars here.

Putin came back in 2012. He got Medvedev to support him for a third term as president. But his reentry into the presidency was accompanied by a time of considerable civil unrest in Russia, particularly in the big cities. Keep in mind, it was only a few years ago that there were massive demonstrations protesting electoral fraud. So from the outset, the tone of his third term was different. It was more restrictive, it was more control-oriented, and it was more nationalist, anti-foreign, and anti-American.

Now, Russians generally continue to have a very high opinion of Putin. And I know there is controversy about what those poll numbers really mean, and I concede there is some artificiality. But by almost any reasonable measure, he has the approval of a very large majority of the population, more than ever, in fact. But that doesn't mean that the system doesn't have problems; it clearly does. In our authors' workshop today, we looked at some public opinion data about assessments by ordinary Russians in public opinion surveys about whether they think the country is on the right track or on the wrong track. If you look at the results for this kind of questioning, you see a pattern that is actually quite different from the almost uniformly high opinion that Russians have of their individual leader. Russians are often pessimistic about their collective future, but they are seemingly past the point of changing their opinion of Putin. Beneath

the surface, problems are there, and have been there, to a greater extent than perhaps we on the outside realize. From this point of view, the post-Crimea spike in government approval may be a honeymoon period, not likely to last.

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I would now like to discuss briefly the essays that will be published in our upcoming *Dædalus* issue. Our first essay, by Stephen Kotkin, is entitled "Russia in the World: Past, Present, Future." Steve argues that Russia's biggest problem, and the one that is going to determine what direction it takes in the next ten to fifteen years, has to do with its relationship to the international environment. Russia, he says, has found itself recently where it often was historically: it had ambitions to have an effect in the international system that were not matched by its resources.

Valerie Bunce discusses the so-called color or colored revolutions, of which there have been about a half-dozen in the post-Communist and post-Soviet space in Europe and Eurasia. Her essay addresses the question of whether a Putin or post-Putin Russia could experience its own color revolution: the overthrow of a government from below with significant mass participation. Valerie assesses the potential vulnerability of Russia to such upheaval, but also discusses the resilience of the regime, concluding that such an outcome is not likely, but not impossible.

Henry Hale's essay is entitled "A Change from Change? Patronal Politics Beyond Putin." He applies his model of patronalism to contemporary Russia, and concludes that a breakout from this pattern, which emphasizes the provision of clientelistic and such services through a single political pyramid, is not terribly likely, although he does discuss certain conditions under which it might occur.

Fiona Hill's essay, "The Next Mr. Putin: The Question of Succession in Russia," most directly addresses the high politics of the next decade or so. She reviews the possibilities, telling us quite a bit about Putin and how he has operated, and argues that the most likely thing we are going to see, at least in the next eight to ten years, is an "operation successor" – an attempt by Putin to revisit the theme of succession to him as national leader, which he did address once before in a preliminary fashion with Medvedev. That experiment didn't really work out, and she thinks he is likely going to return to the question.

Brian Taylor discusses the Russian *siloviki* and political change. The *siloviki*, again, are high-placed officials who come from agencies like the FSB (the neo-KGB), the Russian military, the ministry of the interior, and so forth. Brian finds that the *siloviki* are, in fact, internally divided on many issues. They may not be eager to defend the current regime with blood, or with their blood, which is an important thing to note. But he thinks that all past precedent and their current profile suggest that they will play this game, as he put it, "from the side and not from the front."

Stanislav Markus wrote an essay on the Russian oligarchs and the prospects of their leading a reform movement. He finds that the wealthiest members of Russian society are not a likely source of challenge to the status quo. But he does think that they want what he calls "de facto elite accountability"; that is, more accountability of those in power to society and better relations with the West. He points out that some recent maneuvers of the government, including the renationalization of property, have been met with puzzlement from Russian big business.

Elena Chebankova has written about what she calls "the critical intelligentsia." She considers whether it is possible that there would be trouble or potential instability originating from that sector. She thinks probably not, but doesn't rule it out entirely. She also discusses what she calls paradigmatic pluralism: that the Russian public space actually hosts quite a few ideas about the future. There is no consensus about any in particular, and this has created a kind of equilibrium, which she thinks is quite likely to persist for a while.

Marlene Laruelle wrote an essay on Russian nationalism as a potential source of change. One of the things she does is clarify the many things that Russian nationalism means. She points to some specific actors who might bring it into the central political arena.

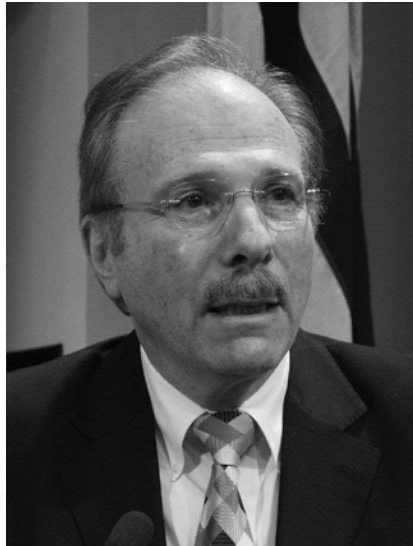
Maria Popova talks about Russia as potentially a rule-of-law state. Her view is that although one can look comparatively to examples where movement in this direction has occurred, it is very unlikely to occur as long as the Putin system is still essentially intact, because that system has so successfully found ways to blunt the momentum toward rule of law.

Samuel Greene's essay on "Hardship, Mobilization, and Russia's Social Contract" is

about Russian civil society at a time of considerable economic shrinkage and hardship. Sam portrays the government, on the one hand, and civil society, on other hand, as undergoing a process of mutual adaptation, which may turn out to be fairly durable.

And finally, Keith Darden has written about the international environment, which is also the subject matter of Stephen Kotkin's essay. Keith places a lot of emphasis on the interconnections and echo effects between the external environment and the internal environment. He thinks that this may prove to be the key to understanding what is going to happen, but he puts a somewhat different spin on it than Steve does.

This collection of essays is a work in progress – we are thinking about the Russian future, but we don't have a single picture to draw. I would venture to say that there is not a lot of extreme optimism about a change in the direction that might be popular on this side of the Atlantic, but we feel we are in no position to foreclose any of the possibilities. We just hope that this issue of *Dædalus* helps to spark an intelligent discussion of the possibilities.



George Breslauer

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My concluding essay, in the upcoming, Spring 2017 issue of *Dædalus* on "Russia Beyond Putin," will be called "Images of the Future," and will relate the arguments of the authors' essays to my own thinking about Russia's alternative futures. When we think of alternatives to the Putin regime, we can recall how, after the collapse of communism, Western observers were eager to hope that Russia might eventually evolve into a liberal democracy. We all thought a great deal about indicators of and strategies for a transition to democracy and sought to apply those insights to analysis of Russia under Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Under Putin's regime, there is widespread acknowledgement that Russia is not headed in that direction. Indeed, in the collection of essays that will be published in the upcoming issue of *Dædalus*, not one author predicts a democratic breakthrough toward rule of law, toward proactive self-mobilization by civil society, or, to use the phrase of Sam Greene, toward a long list of modern democratic attributes. Transition to democracy, if by that we mean a liberal democracy and not a more watered-down version, is now viewed, at least within the next ten to fifteen years, as slightly chimerical.

What might be the alternative? At the other end of the spectrum, one can imagine a "Russite" or imperialist-fundamentalist reaction, a reversion to some kind of revanchist fascism, which is the nightmare of moderates and liberals along the political spectrum in Russia today. None of the essays in this issue assigns this scenario a high probability in the next fifteen years, but, given Russia's travails at home and abroad, it is not difficult to imagine that a political-economic breakdown of some sort could lead to the ascendance of a revanchist regime.

With liberal democracy and Russite fundamentalism at the two extremes, a middling alternative to the current regime is what I call "elitist liberalism." Maria Popova would call it "authoritarian constitutionalism" – not rule *of* law, but rule *by* law. This intriguing possibility, analogous in a way to what Marxists might have called a "bourgeois revolution" but without the violence, is driven by the urge on the part of business elites to ensure their property rights. While it would provide formalized political representation and stable expectations to business elites, it would still be an authoritarian regime vis-à-vis the masses. Brian Taylor's evidence about the security services and military asserting themselves principally to avoid a breakdown of the state speaks to the possibility of an impending elitist liberalism, because such an alternative would broaden the state but not require its collapse as a precondition for such broadening. It also accords with Stanislav Markus's argu-

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ment that many business elites have a material stake in remaining open to the global capitalist economic order. Thinking about the possibility of elitist liberalism is a useful antidote to thinking that the only alternatives to Putinism are a breakthrough far to the left or far to the right.

Whether one anticipates systemic alternatives to Putinism hinges in part on how one understands the regime currently in place. Many scholars would call it competitive authoritarianism, led by a strong presidency, in which the formal institutions that might check the power of the presidency have been hollowed out and/or are held together through competing and interlacing patron/client networks, both within the state and in nonstate institutions.

A major feature of this "patronal" regime, as Henry Hale calls it, is its ideological signature. It is supported by a broad, centrist coalition that marginalizes both the radical liberals or democratizers on the left and the radical nationalists or fascists on the right. And this, because it is such a broad coalition, allows Putin, as a politician and as the ultimate arbiter in this political system, to tack back and forth among points on the broad ideological spectrum as circumstances suggest. Elena Chebankova expounds on the breadth of this ideological spectrum, writing about what she calls "paradigmatic pluralism," or a multitude of paradigms that all stay within the parameters that the Putin regime has defined as legitimate – or politically persuasive – discourse. Additionally, Putin can make side payments that keep people under the umbrella, even as he curries support from the other side. As he is the ultimate arbiter among competing networks, he is able to play them off each other. He may not always get his way, but he chooses his battles and has the resources to define the general course and to punish defiance.

Now, within this broad coalition, there is a spectrum that ranges from economic reformers at one end, to nationalist-statist consolidators, at the other. Those are not necessarily mutually exclusive paradigms, since they focus on different types of issues and therefore do not compete along the same dimension. In principle, one could imagine a highly nationalistic, national-consolidating economic reformer, though you will have to look hard for them. When Dmitry Medvedev was president, the rhetoric that he endorsed was more in the direction of the economic reformists, or modernizers, whereas Putin, since he came back to power in 2012, has embraced rhetoric that goes more toward the nationalist, statist consolidators. The coalition has a built-in tension, since most economic reformists are skittish about the prospect that nationalist consolidators would constrict both political and economic freedoms, while most nationalist consolidators are apprehensive that economic reformists would unleash forces that might diminish political controls and opportunities for rent-seeking through corruption.

What might be the response to anomic outbursts (like labor activism), shocks to the economy, sustained austerity, growing popular anger about corruption, or a drop or a surge in the president's popularity?

What factors might drive change within this broad coalition? And, what would determine whether the Putin pendulum swings to the moderate left or to the moderate right? International events and the international environment are certainly among the factors, though people may differ as to which direction they predict he would go in the event of this or that type of international climate. A very tense international situation could reinforce the credibility of the nationalist consolidators – or could undermine their credibility if the price of defiance were widely viewed as exorbitant. Short of such swings, the international environment puts constant pressure on Russian business interests. Thus, there are incremental international pressures resulting from spontaneous adjustments dictated by global markets. Putin, in his rhetoric, may be expressing his disillusion with the United States and with the European Union, and talking more about integration with the Asia Pacific. But even integration into the Asia Pacific region is going to generate international pressures that would force a certain amount of rationalization and

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openness of the Russian economy that the economic reformers within this coalition would welcome.

Another set of factors concerns society. What might be the response to anomic outbursts (like labor activism), shocks to the economy, sustained austerity, growing popular anger about corruption, or a drop or a surge in the president's popularity? These kinds of issues may not lead to a breakout toward either liberal democracy or Russite fundamentalism, but they are likely to lead to shifts of emphasis within this coalition, and growing contradictions if those shifting emphases don't work.

On the elite side of things, we might think of focal points – elections, political succession, incapacitation of the leader – during which people start thinking about alternatives, and perhaps acting upon them. Those are the instances that can become moments for mobilization of pressure, both within the political elite and within the broader society. Of course, there could be shocks along the lines of internal terrorism that, depending upon its scale, location, and intensity, could shift the political calculus. Or there could be a split within the elite – ministerial officials, the security services and the military – with political activists coalescing toward those with whom they have greater sympathy, because they now, as a result of having observed that split, perceive change as possible or feasible.

A question that occupies my mind is how much political skill and political instinct does it take to manage this expansive coalition? If you imagine steering a sailboat, it may all seem fairly automatic. But one gets the sense that it requires a lot more than automatic responses, because the winds are continually shifting, and the commitments that you make during one wind shift might affect your ability to deal with the next. I wonder whether we should think of Putin as just bobbing and weaving and reacting, with little sense of strategy. Or should we instead imagine that, having been doing this now for over sixteen years, and prospectively doing it for another eight, the ultimate historical judgment on Putin may well be that he showed a great deal of political skill and strategic thinking in a very difficult situation.

A second question that I ask myself, in light of the paradigmatic pluralism reflected in Russian political debates, is whether there is a poverty to the dominant American media depiction of the Russian media. As one colleague who reads the Russian press every day said to me, he sees more plurality of opinions expressed in the Russian press than he does in the American press. That is not an absurd statement. Yes, you can find those areas like television, where the government's control has been much more suffocating, knowing that television reaches such a large proportion of the population, but there is also a great deal of public discussion about alternative possibilities in Russia, and it behooves us to pay attention to that.

And finally, I think about the level of corruption: both petty and grand corruption and inequality in Russia. I think of that in the context of eruptions, like the Arab Spring and color revolutions, the main goal of which was dignity, and the main emotion during which was indignation. These two concepts – dignity and indignation – come from the same root. There is indignation about the fact that corruption and inequality have marginalized people to feel as if there is no justice in the cards that they have been dealt. The question in my mind is, if dignity is a key issue in regimes that are of that sort, is such corruption sustainable in a high-income, highly educated country? And if so, for how long?

As we ponder the possibilities, we must bear in mind that the absence of a break-out to either liberal democracy or revanchist fascism does not mean that no significant change has taken place. The very breadth of the reigning coalition, and the looming possibility of elitist liberalism, mean that Russia beyond Putin might be marked by any number of significant changes within the current parameters of the imaginable.

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