



WHEN PUTIN FALLS

Executive Summary

A WIKISTRAT CROWDSOURCED SIMULATION



May 2013

SIMULATION BACKGROUND

Vladimir Putin has ruled post-Soviet Russia since the end of 1999 and has clearly expressed a determination to maintain his rule throughout the rest of this decade. But with the nation's growing urban middle class signaling its rising discontent with the "Potemkin village" that is the Russian democracy, it seems clear that this will be a difficult accomplishment even for the man who has been able to dominate the country for so long. Russia's oligarchic capitalism still suffers significant capital flight and a depressing brain drain, suggesting a populace simply marking time. But where is it heading?

In March 2013, Wikistrat ran a ten-day crowdsourced simulation in which over 70 analysts from around the world collaboratively explored possible scenarios for Russia's political future, revolving around how and why Vladimir Putin might relinquish power by or in 2018 and what this might mean.

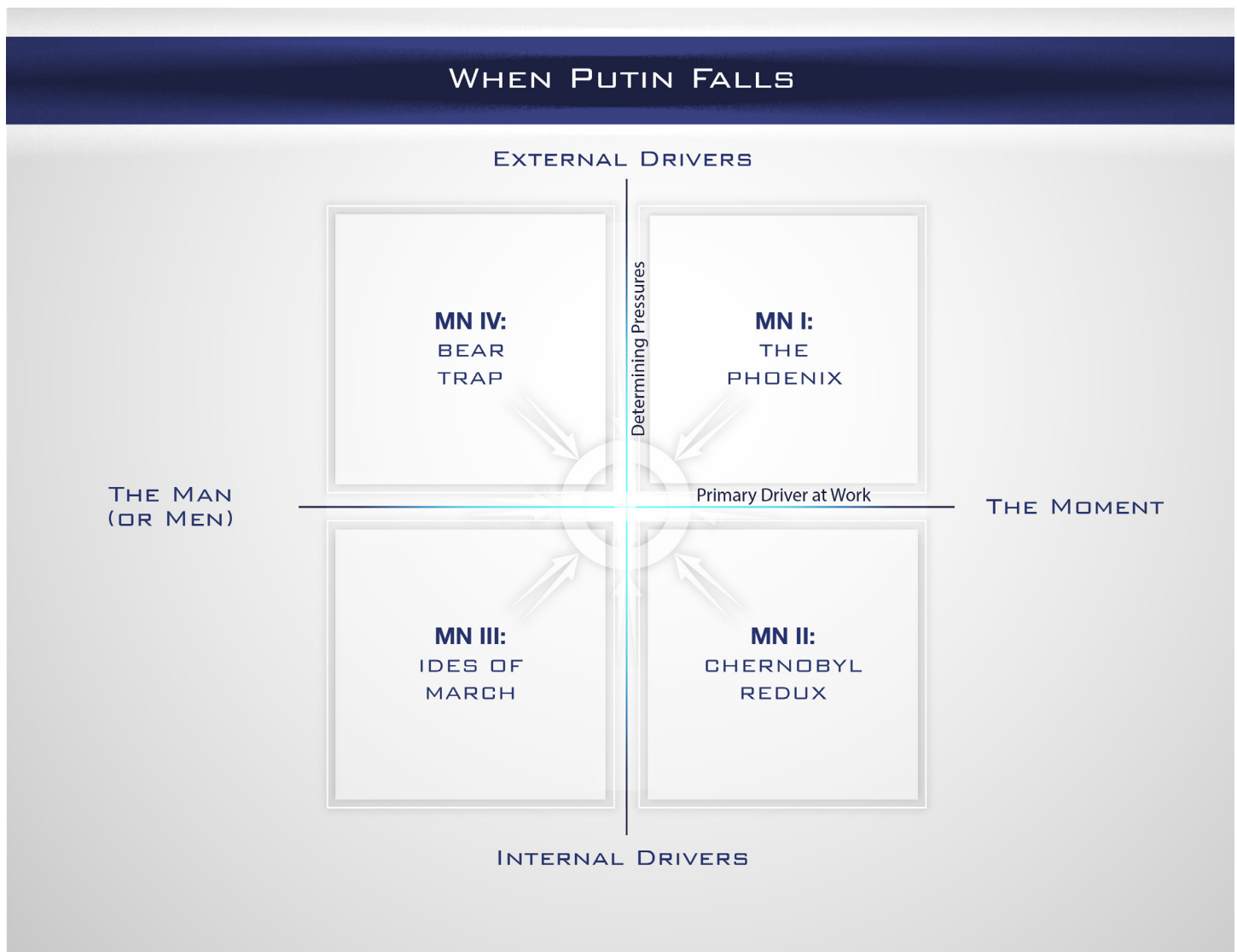
Overall, the simulation demonstrated that there is no consensus on Russia's future trajectory. Does Putin's departure from the political scene reflect or lead to a liberalization and stabilization of Russian politics, or else a further drift towards authoritarianism and potential fragmentation and alienation? Scenarios envisaging the former tended to emphasize the rise of a new, younger elite and the need to reconcile the urban middle class – and foreign investors – with the Kremlin. Conversely, hasty efforts at liberalization, external challenges or the threat of insurgency, terrorism or separatism at home could lead to the rise of a hardline regime, more deeply rooted in the security apparatus, mobilizing nationalism and coercion as a substitute for meaningful democratic inclusion.

Of course, even dramatic events need not have dramatic consequences. It is always possible that although events may conspire to bring Putin down, the system he established might manage to survive without undue reform or discomfort.

OVERVIEW OF MASTER NARRATIVES

Through analyzing and synthesizing the 35 scenarios created during the simulation, it is possible to identify several central assumptions and drivers likely to shape Russia's development in the coming years. The scenarios have been clustered around four main Master Narratives (MN), in turn organized along two fundamental axes.

The X-axis represents the primary driver at work, whether it is Putin's own decisions or those of other political actors (to the left) or simply the "moment," some external factor (to the right), possibly exacerbated by decisions made in the Kremlin. The Y-axis instead addresses whether the determining pressures come from outside Russia (to the top) or from within (to the bottom).



Master Narrative I THE PHOENIX

(“The Moment” plus “External Drivers”)

From crisis, a new opportunity, as a dramatic economic slowdown divides the elite and galvanizes the opposition, forcing Putin to step down and elevating a consensus-building modernizer.



When Vladimir Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, the Russian people accepted him with a sigh; he won a bare majority of the vote, but that was against no credible alternative and backed by a pliant TV media. However, while Putin had not changed, the Russian population certainly had – not least with the rise of a dissatisfied urban middle class. Putin may be extremely vulnerable to economic contraction, as his ability to manage the elite and pacify the population depends largely on his ability to distribute resources and present himself as an effective manager of “Russia, Inc.”

The most likely challenge would come from depressed oil and gas prices, which would leave Russia increasingly unable to maintain its global power pretensions abroad and social and political commitments at home. Facing protests on the streets, key figures within the elite, fearful lest they be dragged down by their president, prevail on him to step down. Early elections would likely see no clear victor and instead the emergence of

a compromise candidate and an historic opportunity to move Russia closer towards genuine democracy in an unusual situation in which the elite and the opposition alike have reason and the chance to work in tandem.

Master Narrative II

CHERNOBYL REDUX

(“The Moment” plus “Internal Drivers”)

When some unexpected disaster demonstrates the inefficiencies and corruption of the government, it catalyzes deep-seated resentment and leads to the collapse of the existing system.



The Putin regime is fragile, not least dependent upon his vestigial reputation as the efficient manager of crises. There are numerous divisions within the elite, and deep reservoirs of resentment and disaffection within the population at large. So far, though, no leaders or issues have emerged which have been able effectively to turn these against Putin. That could quickly change were there to be some major, public and humiliating debacle, especially one highlighting the failings of the state, such as a crisis at the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, or a mishandled natural disaster. Just as the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster undermined the Communist government, so too a new crisis could spread widespread disillusion and anger, and focus it on Putin.

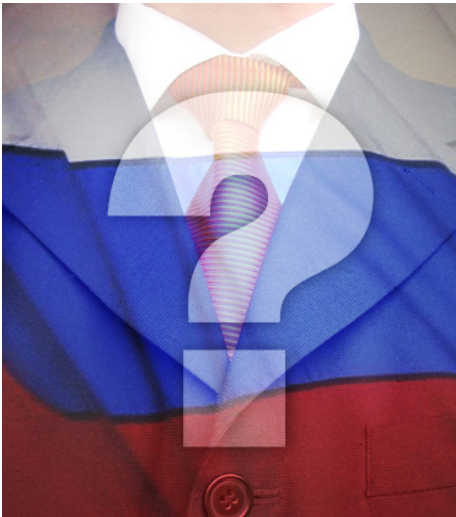
The elite may take this as an opportunity to try to preserve their positions and pressure him to stand down in favor of a successor whom they hope would be able to restore the Kremlin’s authority. This could simply be a bid to preserve the essence of the system, or else an opportunity genuinely to reform the country at a time when the established interests are at their weakest.

Master Narrative III

THE IDES OF MARCH

(“The Man/Men” and “Internal Drivers”)

Putin has in the past demonstrated himself the master of Kremlin intrigues, but he has also created a carnivorous system that could consume him if he missteps, and that seeks to create “Putinism without Putin.”



Putin has in the past demonstrated himself the master of Kremlin intrigue, but he has also created a carnivorous system that could consume him if he missteps. Perhaps he succumbs to ill-health; maybe he tries pushing through an anti-corruption campaign that genuinely limits the elite's opportunities to enrich itself. Whatever the trigger, the elite may seek to create “Putinism without Putin,” replacing him with an insider, chosen to rule in their interests. However, Putin's expertise in keeping the oligarchs from each other's throats would probably both be missed and hard to replace, not least given that once the elite have deposed one president, they are less likely to fear his successor. This cannot be a long term solution, though, and unless a president emerges who is able to reassert executive rule, Russia will increasingly be ruled in practice by a self-interested and uncontrolled oligarchy.

Master Narrative IV

BEAR TRAP

(“The Man/Men” and “External Drivers”)

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One of the vulnerabilities of the Putin system is the lack of checks and balances upon presidential authority; an ill-judged decision by the Kremlin could thus have disastrous consequences. Under pressure, Putin could be tempted to reckless adventurism abroad. His hope would be that a quick and dramatic victory or the creation of an “enemy” could restore his legitimacy. However, the risk is that this could backfire dramatically, even alienating the elite. Under pressure from all sides, Putin would be forced to resign. His blunders will have breathed new life into the opposition and also made Moscow appear weak, foolish or malign, triggering calls for more dramatic change. The elite, seeing that their privileged status is under threat, feels that it cannot allow democracy to take its course. Either the elections are blatantly and extravagantly rigged or else they are bypassed with the declaration of an emergency regime.

The new order would be much like the old, but increasingly falling back on nationalism and oppression. In the long term, this will no longer prove a sustainable model if Russia wishes to become a modern, dynamic state. However, in the short term, reform and hope give way to stagnation and oppression.

STRATEGIC TAKEAWAYS

- Russia is more fragile than Moscow claims and the rest of the world would probably like to believe. The present boundaries are open to challenges ranging from North Caucasus secessionism to Chinese encroachment in the Far East. More insidiously, many local elites are working to preserve their functional autonomy, and the unity of the central elite is questionable, such that vicious and possibly violent internecine conflicts are very possible.
- The current elite is united in seeking to preserve its own dominance and opportunities for enrichment, but otherwise deeply and widely divided along personal and factional lines as well as in their vision for Russia's future. Putin's strength has been to position himself as the indispensable arbiter and broker and without him the divisions would likely be much more visible and significant.
- There is, at present, no visible alternative to Putin but a number of ambitious figures are eager to succeed him. For the moment, this means maneuvering to become his anointed successor when he steps down; however if Putin appears weak this could easily change into a struggle to replace him sooner.
- Opposition figures lack the will, political machine and national profile to mount a credible challenge to the Kremlin. However, there is considerable, latent popular dissatisfaction, especially at corruption, growing economic and regional inequality and a lack of meaningful popular participation. So far, the official opposition and the urban protest movement have failed to find ways of mobilizing these sentiments, but it is possible that a figure could emerge from relative obscurity and quickly become a national figure precisely by being able to do so.
- The importance of Putin's image as the all-knowing problem-solver leaves him vulnerable to major embarrassments. A major terrorist attack, a failure to mount the Sochi Winter Olympics successfully, the collapse of a major corporation – any unexpected reversal of this kind could provide a “tipping point” that exposes the shortcomings of his economic and political model. This could induce the elite to turn against him, scapegoating him to protect their own interests.
- Putin's relationship with the elite is crucial. He is dependent on them and his downfall is more likely to be because he becomes dangerous or outlives his use to them rather than because of public protests or political opposition in their own right. This limits his freedom of maneuver, not least in seeking to curb their excesses. Any serious moves towards liberalization or fighting corruption would threaten them.

- At present, the Communist Party's core supporters are largely elderly and its leader, Gennady Zyuganov, demonstrates little hunger for power. Nonetheless, were Zyuganov or a successor to adopt a more positive strategy to connecting with younger radicals and the disgruntled "silent majority" then the Communist Party has the only national political machine able to mount a credible challenge to the pro-Putin United Russia bloc.
- Russo-American dynamics are not the ones to watch; Russo-Chinese dynamics most certainly are. Russia cannot bully China, but nor can Russia afford to be bullied by China. This is a pragmatic but suspicious relationship which could worsen not because either side wants this to happen, but because of the tensions and contradictions present. In particular, the Russian Far East and eastern Siberia – full of resources, empty of people – are Russia's Achilles heel.
- Putin today is not the Putin of the 2000s – or at any rate, Russia today is less comfortable with and for him. If he proves unable or unwilling to adapt, he will become increasingly anachronistic. He will then face the classic dilemma: Try to hold onto power as long as possible, or bow out gracefully in the hope of preserving his legend and legacy and sponsoring a successor able to offer him influence and immunity in retirement.

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This report was based on the collaborative efforts of more than 70 analysts.

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