

## **RUSSIA’S ‘MANAGED DEMOCRACY’ IN 2000S: HOW INFORMAL POLITICS CONTRIBUTED?**

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### **Abstract**

Russian Politics since 1990 witnessed an essential change which was expected to be a democratic transition. However, Putin’s presidency beginning with 2000 represented a turning mainly depending on the *power vertical*. This study aims at clarifying functions of informal politics in the construction and operation of Russia’s Managed Democracy since 2000. Through identifying practical responses to theoretical considerations I tried to put forward how the informal networks that traced back to Soviet period and Yeltsin’s presidency shaped political life of today’s Russia. Since it is hard to identify informal political networks, the findings of this study could only reach those evidence that were publicly declared or accepted by those in power.

**Key Words:** Russian Politics, Russian Democratization, Managed Democracy,  
Informal Politics

## INTRODUCTION

Many theories on state are, implicitly or explicitly, focused on a linear transition from agrarian to industrial society by accepting the removal of the preexisting societal networks. While society gets more mobile and acquire better living conditions bonds among people turn them into a polity in which the rulers rule for the benefit of the citizens and this necessitated institutions. There is no doubt that any research initiative on a political process begins with the formal institutions of the polity relying upon their ubiquitousness. However, these institutions do not clearly manage all dimensions of the political life in the countries of the world today. That is why; research on any specific area of a country's politics has the potential trouble of becoming inadequate. In order to surpass this problem while analyzing the Russian politics in 2000s, I tried to determine how informal politics affected the settlement of the *managed democracy* in Russia.

I did not attach any positive or negative connotations on its effect in Russia's politics, because; informality may both undermine the state and also substitute for deficiency of it. In this sense, I focused on the McFaul (2001) and Fish (2005)'s definitions of democracy and political transition. I adopted a comparative perspective to differentiate it with Putin's *managed democracy*. In this context, it gained significance how informal politics in Russia undermined or substituted the consolidation of Putin's system during the last one and a half decade.

This study is based on theoretical research and will be conducted through qualitative method. It will provide a better understanding of the stability in Russian politics and also will shed light on the possible defective areas that can cause instability of Russian politics in coming decades.

### 1. Points of Analysis for Considering the State and Informal Politics

Political scientists inherently focused on the formal institutions of the state in order to analyze the working of the state. Especially when the western democracies are used as a base in political analysis, the common knowledge that the democratic institutions are born out of the relations among people prevails over the acceptance of the existence of informal ties within society. This brings the question in mind: is political science well-equipped to study informal politics?

As a political science student when you go over one of the well-known books in the discipline, such as *Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) by Andrew Heywood, it is easy to

see the dominant perspective in analyzing a state as a political scientist. Your point of departure becomes assemblies, governments, constitution or at most interest groups which have legitimate place within a polity. Perhaps only *political culture* in this book comes closer to what is my point here to discuss about the recent years in Russian politics. In such a country that experiences post-communist political life, you need more than what a politics book advise. Simply because, existing points of departure are not able to give us necessary tools to analyze persisting ties coming from the Soviet background. Thus, as Scott Radnitz clarifies, four points are significant to keep in mind while analyzing a country's political life in terms of informal actors (Radnitz, 2011: 352):

- I) In what conditions does informality undermine the state and when does it substitute for deficiencies?
- II) What are the historical roots of the robustness of informal politics within, outside and against the state?
- III) What are the sources of cohesion that enable informal actors to act collectively?; and
- IV) How does the relationship between informal politics and the state change over time?

There is no doubt that thinking on these questions is somehow breaking a rule when definitions of *democracy*, *state*, and *politics* are accepted as given by western thought. However, Vladimir Gel'man claims that the formal political institutions are themselves just as secondary, because these institutions will only become truly 'democratic' in their effects if they correspond to the already existing balance of power and relationships among elite groups in regions (Joel C. Moses, 2004: 362). Thus, as Gel'man stresses, it is necessary to leave rooted institutions aside, at least for a while, to understand how the informal politics contributed in shaping post-soviet Russian Federation. This is a hard job, indeed, due to the nature of informality. Since it refers to "a form of interaction among partners enjoying relative freedom in interpretation of their roles' requirements" (Radnitz, 2011: 353), a researcher will not be able to get clear cut answers to her/his questions. Rather, s/he needs to identify extraordinary interpretations of one's position and determine the outcomes reflected to the political life of a country.

"Unwritten rules", as defined by Alena Ledeneva, to a large extent shape Russia's economic and political life. According to her, these rules work like soccer rules which might also be defined as both written and unwritten. Written rules would be formal rules that you should not hurt your opponent, and unwritten rules prescribe how formal and

informal constraints can be circumvented or partially enforced (Ledeneva, 2001: 6). Thus, manipulating the enforcement of rules to one's own advantage will be an appropriate example to the usage of unwritten rules. Undoubtedly, these informal rules exist in all societies, however they do not dominate all the system if formal rules go parallel with them. Because, in this case there will not be any need to use them. But, although a huge transformation in Russian politics and economy began in 1991 after Gorbachev, the system could not evolve into a well-functioning democracy, as clear in Putin's definition of Russian politics: *managed democracy* (Kagarlitsky, 2011). For this reason, it is necessary to analyze the defects in Russian political system and factors that gave way to the domination of informal politics in country's political life.

## 2. The Reasons behind Effective Informal Politics in Russia

The end of the Soviet Union meant also the beginning of a new period in which Yeltsin, as a pro-market capitalism statesman, secured his place at the top of the Russian Federation. The parliament had gained importance with the *perestroika*, but in a short span of life, it became clear that Gorbachev, who believed in a kind of socialist democracy, encountered strong opposition both in the parliament and from the pro-capitalist wing. In this context, Yeltsin's rise to power represented the change from socialist democracy to *oligarchic capitalism*.<sup>1</sup> However, Yeltsin's attitude towards economy was not supported by the parliament and it turned into a fierce struggle among them. It reached such a strong point that Yeltsin needed to organize a referendum to receive approval for his policies. Although he received more than 50 % public support for his policies and his presidency, the opposition in the parliament did not end (Sakwa, 2008: 51). Perhaps, the most important point in this context was the formula produced by Yeltsin for this crisis: oppressing the parliament.

Yeltsin's move against parliament was a turning point in post-Soviet Russia's short political life, because it was also the end of the democratic expectations. In a coup attempt to Gorbachev in 1991 Yeltsin had stand in front of the White House in Moscow. But, this time, he did reverse and dissolved the parliament although he did not have constitutional power to do. He determined December 1993 for both referendum of the new constitution and parliamentary elections. As it is seen, the climate was mature for the informal political ties as a result of these developments. The first and foremost formal

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<sup>1</sup> *Oligarchic Capitalism* or *Organized Crime Capitalism* are used for the characterization of the new political and economic system in Russian Federation, and they are widely accepted in the discipline.

institution that is supposed to represent *the people* had been dissolved and the presidency, with the new constitution, became the only center of the authority in the Federation. New parliament established with the new constitution was quite weak and political system was a presidential one that does not resemble any other presidential system that is claimed to be democratic (Kotz and Weir, 2012: 321). Thus, all authority was entrenched in the presidency, together with those oligarchs who are not working in opposition, but reverse, working for the stability and the success of the new regime. The president has the authority to pass a decree and parliament can only decline it with a  $\frac{3}{4}$  majority, which makes it almost impossible. Thus, the only legitimacy comes from direct elections that determine the president, however; the weakness of the parliament, strong position of one man (the president) to issue decrees and strong informal political ties as a result of the shift from socialism to capitalism in the country drove some academicians to define it as an *authoritarian presidential system* (Kotz and Weir, 2012: 322) (emphasis added).

That is not the shadow of a doubt that informal political ties can be both a result and also a cause of the inability of the formal institutions. Yet, in terms of Russian politics after Soviet dissolution, it seems that the nature of the shift from socialism to capitalism, and the authoritarian solutions to the struggle between president and the parliament gave way to the appropriate situation to use informal political ties. While mentioning on which basis informal politics is likely to flourish, I had stated that limited democracy or lack of democracy paved the way for it. As I gave clues in the introductory part, Michael McFaul who defined illiberal democracy (McFaul, 2001, pp. 309-312) in his works, explained also what kind of a path Russian politics is following. Together with *Nikolay Petrov*, of the Carnegie Moscow Center, he analyzed the basis of Russia's managed democracy, thus, helping us to understand the flourishing informal politics in the country. They outlined the basis of managed democracy of Russia as the following:

- I) A strong presidency and weak institutions,
- II) State control of the media,
- III) Control over elections allows elites to legitimize their decisions,
- IV) Visible short-term effectiveness and long-term inefficiency. (Petrov and McFaul, 2005)

Especially with the recent years' arrangements political system in Russia became vertically integrated to the president by fixing the system's stability to only one man. Thus, of course, there will be no motivation for the regional governors (not elected, but

appointed by the president) to make his region to succeed; but they will be motivated to obey the president. Just like the regional governors, perhaps the same can be said for the oligarchs stated above. They had to pursue good relations with the government in order to maintain their positions. Thereby, hidden connections emerge that are not so hard to monitor as claimed by Robert Legvold in his review of Alena V. Ledeneva:

"'Informal practices' are the grease that interests Ledeneva, and in Russia they are the material that fills the gap between formal legal institutions and informal extralegal norms. They operate in politics (through illicit electoral manipulation), where business and politics meet (in insider mutual-protection societies), and in the economy at large (through barter, double bookkeeping, and "privatized" government agencies and services). Each has roots in Russian and Soviet history but with the important difference, as Ledeneva notes in her thoughtful exploration of both their nature and their effect, that informal practices in today's Russia are of, by, and for the few, not something accessible to the uninitiated."(Legvold, 2014)

After considering on the state and informal politics; and the reasons behind the existence of informal politics in a country, it will be necessary to see how it is experienced in Russia's *managed democracy*.

### **3. Informal Politics in Practice**

In consideration of the foregoing, I tried to put forward that informal political network in Russia was not only inherent in the system, however; it was also born out of the transition process both from socialism to capitalism and also from authoritarianism to democracy. Two and a half decade later one can conclude that democratic transition did not realize and capitalism did not settle with a competitive market in the country. The first thing that should come to mind, in this case, is the persistence of the network among key figures in the political and economic system.

As mentioned above, I tried to explain the role of informal politics in Russian politics both with political ties and also with the economic change in the country. Strictly speaking, key figures who emerged in Russian political life after the dissolution were those who were already in key posts or who had strategic connections. They were the only people who could benefit from the high inflation emerged out of the sudden transition to open price system. Uncertainty drove people to stock more basic consumption goods while the economy was just leaving for an unplanned one. This meant scarcity in basic

consumption goods and the same for raw materials. At the same time, prices were higher in the international market and such a gap among two markets served as a heaven to *oligarchs*. Not surprisingly, most of them was coming from the state-party apparatus or they had close relations to these key figures. Mikhail Khodorovsky was a former member of Komsomol (The Youth Division of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union-CPSU), Vladimir Potanin was from Ministry of Foreign Trade, Alexander Smolensky was a geologist who established Stolichny Bank, and perhaps the well-known example was Boris Berezovsky, a mathematician who established a joint-stock company with Vladimir Kaddanikov (Manager of Avtovaz, The Russian Automobile Manufacturer) and profited while the company could not pay for the workers (Freeland, 2000: 124-135). Needless to say, these oligarchs who owe all their wealth to the economic transition and their informal ties to the rulers of the country, saw their interests in the continuation of this extraordinary conditions.

The historical roots of the robustness of informal politics could be explained as a consequence of long authoritarian rule in Russian political life. But it should not be forgotten that the removal of the workers from any ruling political body, while workers should have been main component of the regime, was another significant point. Thus, transition to capitalism caught the workers without any body to protect themselves, and gave the oligarchs the chance to earn more. In this case, the real question was whether the new ruling elite, Yeltsin in 1990s and Putin in 2000s, would let them to continue in the same direction? And the answer did not change up to now: if informal political ties are not undermining but even substituting the state, then there is no need to ruin them. It was clear in official statements just after Putin's meeting with the oligarchs in July 2000:

“Russian State will continue to be in cooperation with those investors that are working for the interest of the state.” (Kotz and Weir, 2012: 421)

This was a certain step backward from Putin's promises given just before the elections. He had promised to sweep away either groups or oligarchs in regional and federal level. However, he kept his word in the sense that he clamped down those who adopted an oppositional attitude towards his presidency. Accordingly, there emerged two ways of handling this issue for oligarchs: first was to take Putin on and the second was to cooperate that was named by Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way as *organized corruption*. Levitsky defined what Russia experienced in 2000s as institutionalized corruption, patronage and proxy-ownership networks bounding key economic, media and civil society actors to governing parties (Levitsky and Way, 2010: 28).



In fact, even the system had emerged through institutionalized corruption just before the year 2000. The ownership of important raw materials such as oil belonged, until 1995, to the executives appointed by the state. Beginning with 1995 Prime Minister Chernomyrdin, Vice PM Oleg Soskovets and Chubains prepared an agreement and left the management of these state corporations to the hands of former bankers without any competition. Potain obtained Norilsk Nickel for \$ 170 million and Sidanko oil for \$ 130 million, Khodorovsky got Russia's second biggest oil company Yukos Oil for \$ 159 million and Bezerosky got Sibneft Oil for \$ 100 million (Kotz and Weir, 2012: 338). The striking point here is the presidency election in 1996 and the attitude of these new oligarchs. When the election of communist leader Gennady Zyuganov seemed more likely in 1996 elections, all these bankers left their disagreement and seven members (Berezovsky, Gusinsky, Khodorovsky, Fridman, Piotr Aven, Potanin and Smolensk) of this group began to come together constantly and supported and even financed the Yeltsin's election campaign (Kotz and Weir, 2012: 338). While it was expected that free market economy and democratic consolidation would give way to weakening power of these oligarchs, somehow it worked reverse in Russia. These oligarchs not only dominated the economy of the country; but also contributed to the direction of Russian politics in 2000s. It is a well-known fact that Yeltsin left the country to Putin by naming him as his successor.

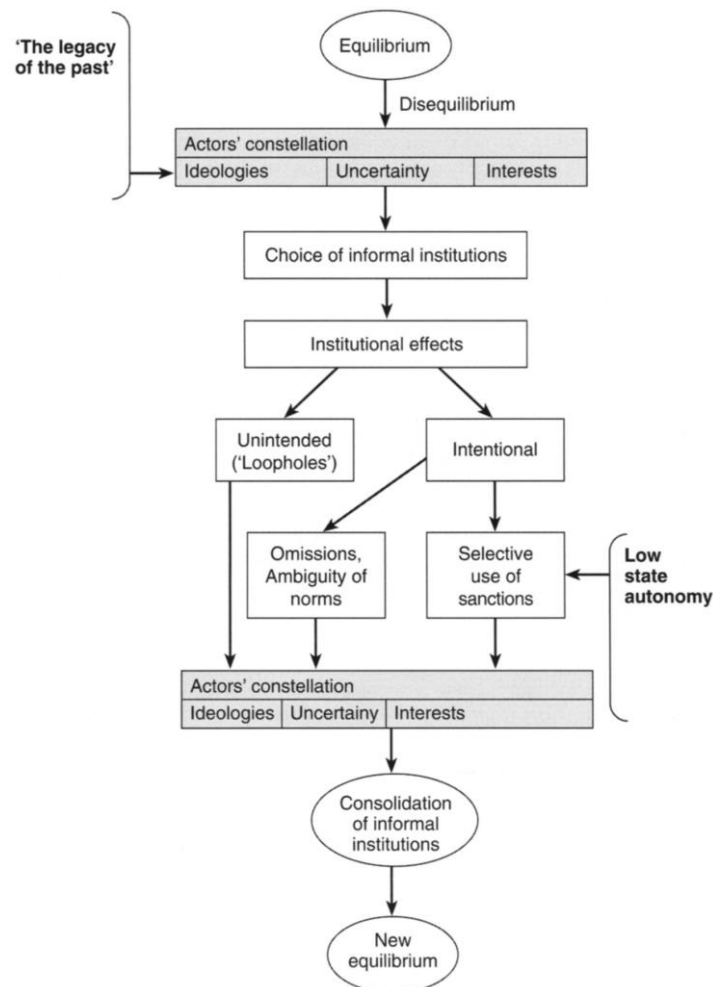
In Figure 1, Gelman describes how factors such as the legacy of the past, actors' ideologies and interests concomitantly affect institutions by using the choice of informal institutions. Accepting the already existing situation in a polity as equilibrium, above mentioned factors reroute the functioning of a process and open new ways of achieving their goals, which is informal politics in our case. Thus, focusing on my case *Russia's informal politics*, I noticed that besides the effect of the legacy of the past and the transitional period in Russia, informal political institutions were related with the self-interest of the institution builders. As it was expected, the new oligarchs created by the hands of the first president Yeltsin played upon him and the circle continued with Putin through new millennium. Needless to say, playing upon the president or ruling elite in general, realized through the usage of media and economy. In this context, seven groups were listed by Kotz and Weir as the following:

- I) *Berezovsky Group*: Logovaz, The Obyedinenny Bank, Sibneft Oil, Aeroflot, ORT and TV6 tv channels, Nezavisimaya Gazeta and Ogonek newspapers.
- II) *Khodorovsky Group*: Menatep Bank, Rosprom Holding, Yukos Oil.



- III) *Potantin Group*: Oneximbank, Norilsk Nikel, Sidanko Oil, İzvestia and Komsomolskaya Pravda newspapers, Svyazinvets telecommunication company.
- IV) *Alfa Group*: Alfa Bank, Tyumen Oil.
- V) *Gosinsky Group*: MOST Bank, NTV channel, Echo Moskvyy radio station, Segodnya newspaper and Itogri magazine.
- VI) *Smolensky Group*: Stolichny Bank, Kommersant.
- VII) *Inkombank*: Magnitogorks Metalurgy, Samara Aluminium and aircraft factory. (Kotz and Weir, pp. 339-341)

**Figure 1.** The Formation of Informal Institutions as an Outcome of Institution Building. (Note: Structural factors bold, procedural factors shaded.)



**Source:** Vladimir Gel'man, The Unrule of Law in the Making: Politics of Informal Institution Building in Russia, Europe-Asia Studies, Vol. 56, No: 7 (Nov. 2004)

While some of them suffered after 1998 crisis, some got stronger and new ones such as Gazprom was added in influentially and left its mark on Russia's 2000s. Gazprom's asset value was almost \$ 90 billion by 2005 and since state continued holding an important degree of its shares Gazprom moved in an unspecific way. For instance, Gosinsky's NTV channel was taken under control in 2000 by media department of Gazprom. Although it was declared that the takeover was a result of loans given to the channel, many saw the move as a Kremlin-engineered coup to take control of NTV. (*Businessweek*, 26 April 2001) Gusinsky replied BusinessWeek Moscow Correspondent Catherine Belton's question that 'is he leaving the media business in Russia' as 'He's not leaving the media business in Russia, but the state has taken away everything that was possible to take'. (*Businessweek*, 26 April 2001) After years the issue seemed the same according to Reuters' Moscow reporters that the media arm of state-controlled Gazprom bought mining tycoon Vladimir Potanin's Profmedia in 2013.

Elizaveta Osetinskaya, editor in chief of Forbes Russia states that seven TV channels in one hand look a lot like Mediaset, drawing comparisons with the media empire owned by former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. (Dyomkin and Busvine, Reuters, 2013) In fact, during 2011-2012 election campaign NTV proved its position by broadcasting a series of documentaries which aimed at discrediting Putin's opponents. Thus, as Gelman tried to show in his figure, institution building in Russia moved towards the political dominance of the winners of economic reforms. Those who adopted themselves to economic liberalism that make the state earn from this process achieved to stand in the country. Otherwise, informal institutions were already a useful method to bypass formal ones. Auctions that took place while realizing privatization were a typical example of this issue. A study shows that state companies had changed hands only for % 0.5 of their real worth. By this way, state had gained only \$34.8 billion rather than \$7307 billion. (Kotz and Weir, 2012: 341) This corresponds to the intentional usage of these informal institutions which also took place in Gelman's figure. Taking over media channels or resorting to organized corruption clearly was the usage of informal institutions and network corresponded to the *loopholes* which were a result of the inability of formal institutions to answer the needs of the new political system in the country.

Turning back to the second one of the informal institutions that S. Levitsky stated, there are also strong arguments of vote-buying or manipulation of the vote count in Russia's elections in the last two decades. Elections in a democracy should be free and fair although there are strong protests about elections in Russia, in terms of electoral fraud,

unequal access to the resources during the campaign period and unequal media coverage for the candidates. The European Institute for the Media describes, for example, the 1996 presidential campaign TV coverage as strident, harsh and one-sided. Also in 1999 state-backed TV channels ORT and RTR won the information war against only private TV channel NTV (Gel'man, 2004: 1032) One of the others was just after the 2011 elections when 40000 people gathered and protested the election results. The ruling United Russia's victory in the elections were seen as an expected result through which Medvedev already declared that he would leave the presidency to Putin. The reaction to the protests was replied by Medvedev that he ordered checks into all the reports from polling stations regarding the compliance with the election laws (Lally, 2011). But, Medvedev himself was at the top position of the ruling United Russia, that is why people did not believe in the result. Unequal media coverage was sounded by the Communist Party of Russia and the others especially before the 2003 elections. That is why they claimed the elections were not free and fair.

TV coverage had been predominantly hostile to the opposition parties and candidates; thus it was the result of the political manipulation. When they went to the Russian Supreme Court, they could not convinced the court of the existence of political manipulation. The Strasbourg Court also decided that it did not have sufficient evidence. More than that it put forward the question that was the state under obligation to ensure equal coverage of the parties and candidates during the election campaign. It decided that the state had taken necessary steps to ensure editorial independence. Such a decision showed that some degree of a lack of neutrality would be tolerated by the Court (Rainey, 2014: 544). Moreover, the declaration of income and wealth for the candidates were not the real financial situation and financial transparency became always a contested issue in the country. 2002 and 2003 amendments on the election law did not become effective in creating transparency.

The last one of the three informal institutions that were entrenched in Russia was informal or privatized violence to suppress opposition. When the cost of imposing martial law or banning opposition seem too high, it is an option to apply violence which is believed as coming from the state. Even these informal violence gave way comments that the opposition in Russia missed Soviet rule due to the increasing oppression in recent years under Putin. Ludmilla Alekseyeva, who became refugee in Europe during Soviet era, stated that "perhaps today there are much freedoms on paper, but political murders were lesser than now." In fact, going over the years under Putin, one might detect such events. Sergei Yushenkov (co-chairman of the Liberal Russia political party)

gunned down in Moscow, he was chairing the ‘Kovalev Commission’ formed to investigate whether building bombings before the Chechen wars organized by the KGB. Another member of the commission, Yuri Shchekochikhin would perish of poisoning (Satter, 2003). The arrest of Khodorkovsky in October 2003, the murder of Paul Klebnikov who was investigating a complex web of money laundering reaching to the Kremlin in July 2004, the murder of Anna Politkovskaya who had written many articles on human rights violations in Chechnya and accused Putin as a dictator were the first ones that spring to mind. Killing of the opposition leader Maksharip Aushev of Ingushetia Republic in October 2009 were more recent one to remember (Marquardt, 2009).

## CONCLUSION

As it is seen informal politics flourishes when appropriate conditions emerged out of either historical background or current political situation as happened in Russia. Thus, practices of informal politics as far as I was able to observe and stated above substitute the formal politics in the sense that it enables the formal authority to reach the expected results. However, since it is informal, there will be no authority to supervise this processes and undoubtedly it is going to hurt state authority and damage, perhaps prevent, democratic consolidation.

When considering the effect of the informal politics and informal institutions, one should make differentiation among short-term and long-term consequences. In the long-term it is more likely for structural factors, remembering the Figure 1, to be influential in political life; however, in the short-term, actors’ expectations and ideologies are determinant. In a comparative perspective, years until 2000 were harder in Russian politics because of the informal political actors’ powerful situation. Not only they were powerful, but also Russian state were weaker in comparison to years under Putin. Reforms increased centralization during first years of 2000s were supported by all actors against informal politics, thus state capacity was restored. But, as mentioned above, it did not bring the end of informal political networks, rather it is seen that these ties were replaced by those which are close to the state authority.

As conclusion it can be stated that after two decades it is still hard to say that informal politics in Russia either undermines or substitute for the state. Focusing on the Russia’s domestic politics, one may be aware of the fact that the consolidation of democracy with its central pillar ‘rule of law’ will not be able to realize in coming few years. Thus, informal

politics seems to be effective for more years in Russia, enabling us to see long-term effects over Russian domestic politics.

### **Notification**

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