



The Role of Political Leadership and Elites in the Russian Political System (2000-2025)

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ABSTRACT

Vladimir Putin is one of the most influential leaders in Russian political life. Understanding the president's behavior plays a vital role in analyzing the trajectory of the Russian political system, especially since he has been considered a unique and influential leader in Russian politics since taking power in 2000. Putin's security environment is a major factor influencing the way he governs in Russia. The combination of his intelligence background, nationalist leanings, and strong personality directly influences his approach to political, economic, and social issues. In addition, Russia is distinguished by the presence of multi-level political elite, some of whom have stood by Putin and others who have opposed his policies. All of this has clearly indicated how he dealt with them and remained steadfast in power from 2000 until 2025.

Keywords:

Political Leadership, Russian, Vladimir Putin, Political System

Introduction:

Political leadership, as one of the variables within the political system, plays a significant and effective role in implementing public policies, both domestically and internationally. It thus engages in an intertwined process involving numerous elements, including planning, implementation, and oversight. Political leadership plays a significant role in shaping the political system of any country. Leadership theories differ in their interpretation of the influence of the leader, but they all emphasize the importance of the leader's role in decision-making, determining the direction of the country internally and externally, and shaping the shape of the country's political system. In a country like Russia, where individuals have significant influence over state policy, the Russian president's vision of his country, his understanding of its history and values, and his personal past experiences become a defining factor in political life. Opinions still differ regarding what President Vladimir Putin represents. Given the escalating tensions in relations between Russia and the West in recent

years, interest in the system built by Vladimir Putin has gradually increased, and Putin's ideas and biography have become a topic of great importance. Putin is no longer just the head of state; in the eyes of many, he has become Russia itself. "If there is Putin, there is Russia; if there is no Putin, there is no Russia." Therefore, understanding this man, his personality, and his biography becomes essential for understanding Russian politics during his reign. Accordingly, the research problem can be defined as follows: The political leadership of any regime is the driving force behind its decisions and the mechanism for investing and directing its resources in the best possible way. Some believe that the real reason behind the revival of Russia's role is the policies and orientations of the new political leadership, which has been able to optimally utilize Russia's capabilities and resources. Based on the above, the research problem is: To what extent have the policies and orientations of the Russian political leadership influenced the development of the Russian political system? From this major question, the following questions branch out:

1- What is the nature of the policies and orientations of the Russian political leadership under President Vladimir Putin?

2- What is the nature of the Russian elites and what is their current role?

1- The Concept of Political Leadership:

One definition of leadership is what Abdul Wahab Al-Kayali stated in his Political Encyclopedia, which is "a quality that indicates the ability, capacity, and talent to lead any collective effort and attract a group of people toward achieving a common goal." (1)

This definition focused on the personal characteristics of the leader, making them the decisive factor that distinguishes them from others. The concept of leadership is considered a complex one, as it touches on numerous political, social, and psychological aspects. As a result, definitions of this concept are numerous and varied. Therefore, leadership can be defined as an individual's ability to persuade others within a particular group and to act as a role model to influence them. When studying the concept of political leadership, a distinction must be made between two levels: analytical and procedural (2):

First - The Analytical Level: According to this level, political leadership can be considered a multipolar process, whose members participate in decision-making, taking into account the circumstances facing society. The political leader must be well aware of the dimensions of the situations facing society and make decisions to resolve the problems it faces. Furthermore, some view it as having an impact on most political processes and groups within the political system.

Second - The Procedural Level: Political leadership is viewed as an individual phenomenon stemming from the personal characteristics of the leader, rather than the result of institutional processes or the collective effort of a ruling elite. One of the definitions based on the procedural level is that of Salwa Shaarawi, who defined political leadership as the person at the top of the political pyramid, represented by the President of the Republic, who heads the executive authority. Through these definitions, it can be observed that political leadership is an interactive process between intertwined networks of relationships, all of which contribute to shaping the political leadership style. However, personal

characteristics are what distinguish a political leader from other leaders, and the phenomenon of political leadership cannot be analyzed in isolation from the study of the leader's personal characteristics. In other words, both the analytical and procedural levels are necessary to understand the meaning of political leadership.

2- The structure of the Russian political system: The Russian political system is characterized by a governing system that controls a large geographical area of (17,075,400) square kilometers, inhabited by a multi-ethnic population of (143.5) million people. They are governed by a bureaucratic apparatus of a complex military nature, with geopolitical aspirations that extend beyond the boundaries of this system. In addition, it is organized hierarchically, with the central elite dominating the peripheries. The governing system consists of the Kremlin, the seat of the Russian President. According to the Russian Constitution, the Russian Federation is a federal state with a semi-presidential system of government, where the President of the Republic is the head of state, and the Prime Minister is the head of government. The Russian Federation is essentially a representative, multi-party democratic state, with a federal government consisting of three branches (3):

- Legislative branch: This is the Federal Assembly with a bicameral legislative system. The Duma consists of (450) members, and the Federal Council (166) members. The legislative branch's powers include enacting federal law, ratifying the President's decision to declare war, and approving treaties.

- Executive branch: This is represented by the President of the Republic, who is the Chief of Staff of the Army. He has the right to veto bills before they become effective. He also appoints the Council of Ministers and other officers who administer and implement federal laws and policies.

- Judicial branch: This is represented by the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court, the Supreme Court of Arbitration, and lower federal courts. Judges are appointed by the Federal Council upon the President's recommendation, and it can interpret laws and annul laws it deems unconstitutional.

The Russian Empire, whether Tsarist or Soviet, was a unitary and centralized state, governed by

a centralized control apparatus headed by a charismatic and charismatic president surrounded by the Russian elite (*).

3- President Vladimir Putin as a Model

Vladimir Putin is considered one of the most influential political leaders in the Russian political system of the 21st century, who fits the above description. He has shaped the political, economic, and social landscape of his country for a period of time through numerous strategic moves and military actions against Russia's neighbors, the most recent of which was his war on Ukraine. A- His Political Activity:

On December 31, 1999, former President Boris Yeltsin abruptly announced his resignation and handed over the presidency to the newly appointed Prime Minister and former intelligence officer, Vladimir Putin, who assumed the presidency temporarily, hoping to save a weakened Russia at the time. The presidential elections were held in 2000, and Vladimir Putin won the presidency. Upon his victory, he took several actions, including suppressing the rebellion in Chechnya by launching a large-scale military operation against them (*). During Putin's presidency, he worked to restore stability and order to the country, which earned him widespread popularity in Russia after it suffered from deteriorating political and economic conditions, including a weak currency and rising oil prices. This was achieved by increasing domestic consumption and investments in the Russian economy. Putin worked to improve the economic situation and its growth for nine consecutive years, thus improving the standard of living and increasing Russia's influence on the global stage. He was re-elected as President of the Republic in March 2012, his third term. Since then, Russia has launched a widespread crackdown on freedom of expression. In this regard, the Russian political system has been subjected to much criticism from Western countries, and it began by amassing its forces on the borders of eastern Ukraine. President Putin is considered a security and political figure who held several positions before becoming president. Among these positions was the position of Deputy Mayor of St. Petersburg in 1991, and he was assigned to manage the city's Foreign Relations Committee. Vladimir Putin moved to Moscow to work in the Kremlin in the department responsible for

managing presidential property in 1996. In March 1997, Putin was promoted to Deputy Head of the Presidential Authority, then appointed Head of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB). Putin was then appointed Director of the FSB in July 1998, and shortly thereafter, Putin became Secretary of the Security Council. Putin served as President of Russia for two terms (2002-2004) and (2004-2008). He then stepped down from the position in accordance with Russian constitutional norms, which do not allow more than two terms for a president. At that time, Putin became Prime Minister. He was elected for a third term in 2012 as President of Russia until 2018. This extension came as a result of a constitutional amendment extending the presidential term to six years instead of four (4). President Putin was distinguished by several qualities that he acquired through his work in the Russian intelligence service (KGB), which he entered this field since he was a young man because this work carried symbolism for Putin more than it was an ideological feeling. In other words, his decision was personal and not fanatical about communism. During his work in this agency, he lived in the German Democratic Republic before the fall of the Berlin Wall, but at the same time he was fighting organized crime in the former Soviet Union, including fighting drug smuggling. His life as an intelligence officer ended after the fall of the Berlin Wall, as he feared that the communist system in his country would also collapse without taking quick action to remedy this. Putin returned to the Soviet Union, but he did not find a suitable place for him for political changes in the country. Therefore, he decided to search for new opportunities outside the security organization and began writing a thesis to obtain a doctorate degree from Leningrad University (5).

After the weakness and chaos that prevailed in Russia during the era of former President Yeltsin, the current President Putin came to restore Russia's national glories. The first thing Putin did was to centralize governance in a circle surrounding the president, concentrate economic and political resources in the Kremlin, and emphasize national sovereignty without wanting to be linked to the West, to the point that the name Putinism was given as a doctrine to the Russian political system, which was built according to Putin's aspirations and ideas.

However, the matter was not without some negatives that accompanied Putin's rule, such as that despite his priority to strengthening political, social, and economic stability, he limited the activity of the opposition party and freedom of the press and media. Over time, the Kremlin, under the administration of President Putin, transformed from a constitutional symbol of the head of political power to the center of Russian society and the state, from political parties to youth organizations so that society becomes an embodiment of President Putin's ambitions and thinking. From here, the seeds of Putinism appear in society, as the regime transformed the dynamics of society from an effective and spontaneous dynamic to social organizations that aim primarily to serve the Putinist doctrine (the doctrine of President Putin) by containing all segments of society within organizations whose primary goal is to achieve this. Ideology (6)

Putin's political doctrine (*) emerged with Putin, who redesigned the Russian political system to serve the president's own political doctrine, especially since he refused to be entrenched in the new international order, feeling that it was unfair and lacked a balance of power, a goal Putin sought to achieve (restore Russia's regional role). In the course of this research, we will highlight his most prominent decisions to achieve this goal, including the Russian-Ukrainian war since 2022.

4- Figures and elites close to the Russian president:

Putin's success, in addition to his political and security experience, includes the group of people surrounding him and those close to him, whom President Putin has great confidence in. They can be divided into two categories:

1- Close figures:

A- His guards, who worked with him during his service in the intelligence service and are called the secretariat. Their most important duties include supporting the president's activities, preparing his schedules, preparing and organizing meetings, and keeping him informed of daily developments. Members of this elite are in constant contact with Putin and are characterized by close personal loyalty to the president. They often do not have political experience but no political ambition, but because of their close proximity to the president, they

hold leadership positions in the state apparatus. Among them are Alexei Kudrin, a Russian figure who became Minister of Finance from 2000 to 2011, or Herman Gref, who was Minister of Economy and is also a Russian figure. Or the most prominent example is Dmitry Medvedev, who was President of the Republic and Prime Minister. He is a Russian politician and lawyer who has held the position of Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council since 2020. He also served as President of Russia from 2008 to 2012 and Prime Minister of Russia from 2012 to 2020. B- The second category of Putin's inner circle are those who remain close to Putin even after they move to other positions outside the elite. This includes a number of names, such as Nikolai Patrushev, a Russian politician and security and intelligence officer, who has held the position of Secretary of the Russian Security Council since 2008. He previously served as head of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) from 1999 to 2008. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, who was appointed to this position in 2012, and the head of the Bank of Russia, Yuri Kovalchuk, who was close to Yevgeny Prigozhin and was also close to President Putin until 2023 when he led a rebellion against Russian forces fighting in Ukraine.

2- The Close Elites (7):

We decided to divide the elites close to President Putin from those most closely connected to him to those most distant from him. Accordingly, they can be divided into:

A- The Men or Powerful Ones:

They are the most important component of the Russian elite, as they include the leaders of all the security services in Russia. We can call them the true elite because they are closest to Putin, or in other words, he is part of them and belongs to them. They are the same elite that brought him to power. Among their characteristics is that they share Putin's ideology and national vision of restoring Russia's regional role and revitalizing the idea of Greater Russia. B- Bureaucrats: These are the officials who hold senior positions in the government apparatus for state administration, whose name was changed during Putin's era to the Academy of National Economy and State Service. Putin highlighted this important administrative apparatus by improving salaries to make it more attractive to young people, who are the energy Putin wanted to develop.

However, the matter is not without negatives, as the officials of the administrative apparatus lose their status immediately after leaving this work. This is due to President Putin's reforms in 2001, including concentrating power in the hands of the Kremlin alone, after the regions had enjoyed administrative decentralization, and he appointed unit heads from people with a security background. T- The new oligarchs: They are the owners of public and private companies. The first group emerged during Putin's era, some of whom worked with him in the intelligence service, and some of whom are old property owners. The second group emerged later after Putin formed the center of power and the networks around him. Their relationship with Putin is based on providing political services, often tasks that fall primarily on the state, in exchange for demands and political patronage that allow them to obtain mega-projects. An example of this is the construction of the Crimean Bridge or the Kerch Strait Bridge, which is the longest bridge in Europe, linking the Crimean Peninsula and the Krasnodar Krai region of Russia. Like the services of the Wagner military company (*), this elite is distinguished by its financial independence from the Russian state. C- The old oligarchs: They are the elite furthest from President Putin, given that they were loyal to former President Yeltsin. They financed his re-election campaign, as he was the reason they benefited economically from his privatization system. When Putin came to power, he stripped them of the privileges they had enjoyed, such as removing them from television stations. He struck a deal with them to stay away from politics while retaining their wealth, and directing them to finance state development projects. This elite is the weakest in the structure of the Russian elite, given their minimal role in influencing political decisions, and their limitation to financing or implementing projects desired by the state. Beyond that, the relationship between the two parties is not based on trust. They are known for their pro-Western leanings, and they are the ones who have demonstrated their implicit and overt opposition to the special military operation. They include the likes of Mikhail Fridman and Roman Abramovich.

B- His Economic Activity:

This is on the political side. On the economic side, since President Putin came to power, he has set a goal for his policies and orientations, which is to inject many global economic processes based on the internal development of the Russian state and its ambitions in the context of globalization. He also emphasized the need for Russia to become a modern, economically strong, technologically advanced, socially developed, and politically influential superpower. Putin believed that achieving this goal depended on achieving the necessary recovery in the Russian economy. Therefore, he saw the need to provide the best conditions for economic growth and encourage the activity of Russian businessmen, as well as Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization. The Russian administration even prioritized economic interests over political and politico-military interests. It was widely believed that Russia would not occupy a prominent position in the world unless it rapidly transitioned to economic growth. The essence of Putin's policies is based on the need to transform Russia into a self-sufficient economic power. (8)

C- His Social Activity:

This activity was not isolated from the activities mentioned above, in which Putin linked his social activity to domestic policies, which were primarily represented by the shift towards achieving greater economic progress, which represents the basis for building a strong and well-equipped military force. With the latest weapons and technologies, as well as achieving the principle of Russia's unity and territorial integrity, Russia is moving towards clinging to the North Caucasus region for several reasons, the most important of which is that the independence of the North Caucasus countries will lead to a change in the ethnic policy in this region after the migration and displacement of other non-Islamic ethnicities, and then the emergence of the problem of protecting two and a half million Russians living in the Caucasus, as well as an attempt to maintain Russian influence in both Ukraine and Georgia due to their possession of many natural resources that may contribute to strengthening the Russian economy.

5- Indicators of Tension within the Russian Elite in 2025:

The most prominent problems within the Russian elite can be highlighted in 2025,

especially after the war in Ukraine drained much of the Russian economy. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the economic and political reasons for the tension within this elite and its relationship with Russian President Putin. On the economic front, the first months of 2025 witnessed signs of increasing tension within the Russian elite. The most prominent form of this tension was the dispute that erupted between members of the so-called government economic bloc during the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (June 18-20). Vladimir Putin delivered a closing speech in which he criticized the contradictions among Russian decision-makers regarding their assessment of the economic situation in the Russian Federation. This occurred despite strict censorship of media discourse in Russia (Kremlin censorship). The most important causes of tension within the Russian elite are the economic conditions following the war on Ukraine, which affected economic growth, the optimal value of the ruble, and the return of Western companies—primarily American—to the Russian market. This is especially true if we realize that Russian elites close to President Putin are concerned with their own interests, and most of them have derived their wealth from their positions. This has been the basis of the conflict within the Russian elite, as there is a deep disagreement among Russian decision-makers regarding economic affairs. (9)

Disagreements within Russia over economic policy strategy have been increasingly evident, ongoing since almost the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war and the resulting crisis in relations with the West. These disagreements indicate that the rising costs of the war and the ongoing sanctions regime—along with the instability of energy markets—are exacerbating the problems facing the Russian economy. These issues also generate increasing domestic political tensions, although they are not expected to pose a threat to Putin's regime in the near future. Furthermore, the decision to go to war has created a new elite loyal to Putin, giving them a professional springboard that has pushed them to dominate or control the old elites. Despite their rise to prestigious sovereign positions, siding with Putin in his war has been the deciding factor in achieving hegemony. For his part, this growing conflict has been useful to

Vladimir Putin as a disciplinary tool, but it poses long-term dilemmas, and limited change threatens the reemergence of local clan structures and the strengthening of trans regional factions. As a result, the Kremlin will need to find a solution that balances the interests of both the established regional elites and the war participants favored by the regime. (10)

Conclusion:

After twenty-five years of President Putin's rule, from 2000 to 2025, his rule of Russia can be summarized through several pillars. The first and most important of these is establishing the foundations of Putin's doctrine within Russia and considering it a solid political ideology embraced by all the Russian people, including the political, administrative, and military elites throughout his rule. This can be considered the second pillar of Putin's leadership. Throughout his rule, he worked to eliminate many of the political elites opposed to his rule, allowing him to dominate the political arena exclusively and without any restrictions. This situation did not exist in Russia when he assumed power. This situation evolved into the emergence of new elites during his reign: military elites. Under Russian President Vladimir Putin, they have played a decisive role in determining Russia's domestic and foreign policies and possess significant capabilities and significant influence in decision-making. This elite consists of military, security, and government officials loyal to President Putin. Putin even considers himself part of it, having grown up in the Soviet intelligence service (KGB) and established strong relationships with generals and military leaders, which facilitated his control. On this elite. It can be said that Putin created the new Russia due to his security expertise, as he limited the activity of the elites hostile to him and controlled the activities of their companies. In addition, he restricted political powers, allowing him to be the sole authority in issuing decisions. Of course, this leadership model, which enjoys widespread popularity and a desire to restore Great Russia, makes the emergence of another president extremely difficult. In other words, he must meet the conditions that Putin has.

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