

# Why “Reputation” Is Irrelevant in Russian Public Politics

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Serghei Golunov  
*University of Tartu (Estonia)*

It is rather easy to find compromising information about the majority of Russian politicians irrespective of political affiliation. In established democracies, even just accusations of impropriety often end political careers. In Russia, however, connections with organized crime, financial machinations, shadowy lobbying, discrepancies between income and assets, plagiarism, dubiously secured academic degrees, infidelity, and so on rarely ruin political careers. In fact, there are many cases in Russia when even seriously compromised officials continue to hold their posts for years, and some are even promoted. Thus, to what extent does “reputation” matter in Russian politics? Why does a bad reputation fail to serve as an efficient mechanism for ending the careers of unscrupulous politicians?

This memo examines the factors that shape conventional meanings of reputation in Russian politics, explores why dishonest and compromised politicians are not removed, and investigates the influences the Internet has on the reputations of public figures. First, there is no clear public understanding of the criteria for political reputation in Russia today. Second, loyalty trumps character in the recruitment policy of today’s ruling regime. Finally, opposition leaders, who often use the Internet to expose scandalous cases, seem unable to persuade the public of their own moral superiority over supporters of the Putin regime.

## **Personal Integrity vs. Capability to Maintain Order**

In the Soviet period, the reputations of top politicians were formed mainly through strict control over the media. Meanwhile, low-ranking politicians, who were more in touch with ordinary people, had to satisfy certain conventional moral standards (they had to be good family people, not heavy drinkers, and so forth).

After 1991, the number of independent media outlets increased dramatically. New information genres such as image-improving and smear campaigns appeared in Russian politics. The Russian public of the 1990s, being much susceptible to such techniques and usually not having the wherewithal to verify such information, typically judged new-wave politicians as simply trustworthy or not, without scrutinizing their record. Furthermore, the socioeconomic crisis of the 1990s led to a shift in moral criteria applied to political leaders: charismatic strong personalities, able to impose and maintain order, could be easily forgiven for many shortcomings, including personal dishonesty and criminal connections. This is why military and security officers became highly popular types of politicians in the 1990s. Such people were perceived as reliable and trustworthy, notwithstanding any potential lack of scruples.

Unsurprisingly, perceptions of Putin and his underwhelming cadre were generally based on this ability to maintain order, surpassing any notions of personal integrity. However, when stability had been achieved in the 2000s, the deviousness of the ruling bureaucracy and the numerous abuses of power by military and security officers became more evident and less tolerable for the public. No wonder that opposition members, irrespective of their political orientation, stressed that Putin's regime should be removed because of its corruption and amorality; Alexei Navalny's famous expression of United Russia as a "party of crooks and thieves" perfectly reflects this trend.

Nonetheless, there is still a high demand in Russian society for politicians able to maintain stability. Pro-regime propagandists skilfully exploit this trend while they simultaneously call prominent opposition members unscrupulous and power hungry. Because of a lack of individuals enjoying high moral authority within both the loyalist and opposition camps, the public demand for integrity remains largely not personified while the demand for stability is personified in Putin and his team.

### **Why are Politicians with Tarnished Reputations Secure?**

It is very difficult to make a career in Russia as a pro-government politician without sacrificing moral principles. Even leaving aside the temptation to make easy illicit money, every such politicians will likely face the dilemma of being a person of integrity (who willingly hurts one's own career) and being absolutely loyal to one's patron, not refraining from illegal or immoral actions, such as participating in the falsification of elections, corrupt schemes, writing a thesis for a boss, or persecuting a boss' opponents. Even if a person of principle becomes a prominent pro-government politician because of a good personal reputation (for example, as a scholar or a sportsman), he or she will likely be compelled to support decisions and actions inconsistent with their principles, such as supporting the persecution of regime opponents or defending ill-reputed colleagues. Conversely, a well-established pro-government politician who has proven loyal to the "vertical of power" and made valuable contributions in strengthening the ruling caste (for example a governor who provided votes for the ruling party) may have good reason to believe that patrons will turn a blind eye to misdeeds if they are not too egregious.

High-profile scandals do not produce firings or resignations. Examples include when the head of the federal Investigative Committee Alexander Bastrykin allegedly threatened the life of a journalist in 2012, or Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov was accused of profiteering, or former head of the Federal Youth Agency and *Nashi* youth movement leader Vassily Yakemenko was accused of having links to organized criminal groups in the 1990s, or Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin allegedly received a false higher education diploma, or, as is quite routine on a day-to-day level, officials commit serious traffic violations.

More outrageous is that accusations of serious moral and legal violations are not obstacles for career advancement. Take for example parliamentarian Vladimir Medinsky, who in 2012 became Russia's minister of cultural affairs, despite serious accusations of plagiarism in his dissertation. Not to be outdone, Serghei Bozhenov of Astrakhan was appointed governor of the Volgograd province, despite the fact that he was repeatedly and publicly blamed for conducting shadowy business dealings, abuse of office, embezzlement, persecution of political opponents, and the systematic falsification of elections.

Information pluralism, political competition, law enforcement, and other mechanisms of political purification may be efficient not so much against seriously compromised politicians as against those politicians who do not enjoy firm support from above or suffer a conflict with some influential person in power.

Unsurprisingly, public dissatisfaction with dishonest pro-regime politicians has significantly increased over the last years. There is also a growing demand for more integrity in politics among intellectuals, who think that moral superiority can be wielded as a powerful weapon against the disreputable adherents of Putin's regime. Unfortunately, it cannot be said that the most active opposition members or pseudo-opposition parties and movements are far more scrupulous about the reputation of their members than the loyalists are. For instance, leaders such as Boris Nemtsov and Mikhail Kasyanov were unofficially accused of corruption and failed to convince a large part of the public that the accusations were false.

It is widely believed that all the current parliamentary parties help wealthy people obtain parliamentary seats, providing them with desirable attributes of immunity and the possibility to advance their business interests. Ironically, according to my calculations, based on information from the well-known site, *Compromat.ru*, the percentage of Russian members of parliament publicly accused of concrete and serious misdeeds (most often involving inappropriate lobbying, unfair financial gain, and the abetting of criminal groups) is nearly the same for each parliamentary group: 22 percent for the Liberal Democratic Party, 21 percent for both United Russia and Just Russia, and 20 percent for the Communist Party. Taking this into account, it is not surprising that Putin and his camp occasionally try to persuade the public that the opposition is no better, if not worse, than those who are in government today.

Money aside, even the hallowed ground of academia has been corrupted (something that generally arouses less indignation among the Russian public today than it does Americans or Europeans). In the post-Soviet period, obtaining a post-doctoral

degree became a kind of prestigious activity for the Russian political elite. Firms that write dissertations and arrange thesis defenses for officials and well-to-do business people are flourishing. Sixty-nine percent of Russian ministers and sixty percent of regional heads have academic degrees, while 45 percent of parliamentary deputies have them. According to my estimation, 67 percent of the heads of regions' theses, 40 percent of MP theses, and 29 percent of ministers' theses were obtained under suspicious circumstances. Most typically, during the years immediately prior to an official's thesis defense, the defender was holding a full-time, high-ranking position in a non-academic sphere. The majority of such persons produced no serious single-authored works after their thesis defence. The percent of such dubious paperwork is especially high for post-doctoral degrees in economics, a degree that almost 50 percent of the representatives of the Russian political elite hold. According to my estimation, a full 75 percent of such degrees look suspicious. I would also say that about half the holders of law degrees (the second most popular degree after economics among elites), political science, history, and pedagogy also obtained them under suspect circumstances. A large part of the public feels distrust toward high-standing officials and politicians who defend post-doctoral theses (or are accused of plagiarism). However, this distrust typically does not pose any serious threat to the person's career, as the cases of Russian President Vladimir Putin, Kirov Province Governor Nikita Belykh, or the already-mentioned case of Vladimir Medinsky demonstrate.

### **Influence of the Internet**

Since the 2000s, the Internet has increasingly become a key factor contributing to the formation of reputation. The Internet audience is growing, allowing more and more citizens access to information that is not government propaganda. Some Internet sites function as channels for informal discussions on political topics, others as platforms for alternative elites criticizing the dishonesty of those in power, and others (such as the previously mentioned Compromat.ru website) aggregate both reliable and unreliable information concerning the scandalous activity of prominent politicians. Although Putin and his camp frequently used to pretend they did not notice the various accusations spread about them via the Internet, such information is actually quite difficult to ignore.

Still the role of the Internet in forming national political reputations should not be exaggerated. The leading television channels (all pro-governmental) still have a far larger audience than the Internet. So far, Internet-based reputation scandals have not put an end to the careers of high-ranking politicians; they affected, at most, lesser figures such as Aleksander Bosykh, whose candidacy for a post as the head of the Youth Federal Agency was abandoned in June 2012 after a photo of him was widely circulated on the Internet punching a female opposition activist in the face. On the other side, pro-regime propagandists also intensively use the Internet for their own purposes: trying to persuade the public both that accusations against pro-government politicians are false and that opposition members themselves are unscrupulous and pursuing sordid purposes while trying to discredit Putin's regime.

## Conclusion

Potentially, accusations of unscrupulousness and immorality could be the strongest weapons the opposition could use against the current regime. Yet no set of established criteria for political reputation exists in Russia today; there is no clear conventional understanding of what misdeeds should make a public figure well-reputed or, on the contrary, a political corpse. While for some, perceived reliability and the skill to maintain stability are more important virtues than personal integrity, the demand for scrupulousness in politics seems to be on the rise. However, this demand has not yet contributed much to the purification of Russian politics. The current regime is reluctant to give up compromised but loyal people, while most current opposition leaders are themselves somewhat compromised and hardly considered by the public as holders of high moral standards. It remains a question whether in the foreseeable future there will arise any politically active leaders who enjoy moral authority among the public and who could efficiently promote new moral standards for politics via the Internet and other alternative communication channels.

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