

## RUCARR Conference 2020

# ROUNDTABLE (1) PUTIN'S "CONSTITUTIONAL COUP": CONTEXT AND IMPLICATIONS

Paper proposal by Cristian Collina

**Title:** Putin's Constitutional Breakthrough in a Context of Negative Stability: Inequality, Modernization and International Law

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### Abstract

After Putin set up his system of vertical of power, Russia has enjoyed political and institutional stability thanks also to a series of controlled changes from above including the 2020 Constitutional Reform. Nonetheless, Russia suffered a series of economic and international problems. In its variant of negative stability, Russia faced three main challenges: increasing inequality, slow modernization, constraining international laws and regime. Since the Annexation of Crimea, the situation has worsened with an increased confrontation with the West bearing economic and political implications. This paper will assess how Putin's constitutional reform addressed these three challenges and whether this reform may fix or worsen the scenario.

**Note:** This study draws on my previous work on political inequality, democratic legitimacy and the use of change within the model in Russia, based on 2011-2013 reforms returning the gubernatorial elections. While an article on this topic will be submitted within this year, another article concerning the 2020 constitutional reform is under process. I used official documents, DB and primary data, including surveys and opinion polls.

### Bullet points I would raise during the discussion

- Putin's reform as a breakthrough in the vertical political project. While creating a system mixing democracy and authoritarianism labelled "the vertical of power", Putin has made wide use of changes within the system to sort legitimacy and continuity issues. He has often defined the set of changes within the systems, including the 2020 Constitutional Reform, as a "Proryv" "breakthrough". This use of change is a source of consensus and continuity and sets the context of the recent Constitutional Reform.
- Russian constitutionalism under Putin. Within the vertical of power as a hybrid regime there is a complex relationship between the Constitution and the political regime. More specifically, there is a political use of the Constitutional Court, which to some degree coexists with the legal, conventional, functions of democratic supreme courts. This multifaceted conception of constitutionalism also paved the way to the 2020 constitutional reform.
- Understanding the perspective of negative stability. Over the last 20 years, Russia has grown as an economic power but has also amassed some critical issues such as unsolved inequality, slow modernization, international isolation and confrontation. Despite these issues, Russia remained a stable country with strong leadership. What kind of stability is that? The paper will build on the

notion of negative stability to catch the current balance of achievements and risks in Putin's Russia before looking directly to each issue.

- The containment of Inequality as a source of political legitimacy. The reduction of economic and inequality rates inherited by the radical reforms has been a source of political legitimacy for Putin's vertical project, although it has been under-investigated by the scholars. This engagement in reducing inequality as to prevent it from acquiring a political dimension and secure legitimacy not only is evident in some political actions and declarations over the last decades but is also confirmed by the 2020 Constitutional Reform, containing amendments about minimum wage and pension indexing.
- Modernization with or without the West. After a phase of radical westernization in the 90s and tempered partnership in the 00s, Russia turned to new modernization strategies based on its identity and sovereignty. The 2020 Constitutional reform endorses this approach in several respects. Anyway, a modernisation strategy centred on sovereignty and identity in an age of global interdependence may turn to be slow or even unsuccessful.
- The approach to international laws, decisions and courts. The Constitutional reform reinstates the primacy of the Russian constitution over international law, following a series of arguments with main international bodies as the ECHR. Although this amendment is part of a reaction to constraining international laws and decisions to reinstate sovereignty, the eternal look for an International status that refuse international constraints may result in further isolation and sanctions.
- Concluding remarks.