

## THE RUSSIA BEYOND THE KREMLIN

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*There is a growing discontent in Russia, mainly over living conditions but also, especially in the big cities, over violations of civil rights. Even if the backbone of the state apparatus is showing cracks, the opposition still has a long way to go. A post-Putin regime might not be any more democratic than the present system. However, for now the only real challenge to the established order is coming not from the nationalism and conservatism that are entrenched in the heart of the Kremlin, but from a yearning for democracy.*

Russia is changing. There are many signs of social discontent and of the erosion of Putinism. They have been appearing discreetly but regularly for years, from the great expanses of Russia's geography. The regime methodically does everything it can to eliminate from the political arena the true representatives of the opposition—and these are not the bit players occupying seats in parliament to present a façade of pluralism—and the police have held 2,700 demonstrators behind bars since June. However, these measures are increasingly counterproductive, as happened in the last local elections in Moscow and elsewhere when United Russia, the ruling political party, lost up to a third of its seats in the capital, the country's most emblematic city and, together with St Petersburg, the most politically decisive. As the Russian sociologist Denis Volkov observed when **analysing** the echoes from the Moscow protests rumbling around Russia, the events in the capital have made their mark on society's attitude towards power and, at the federal level, have brought to light new political faces that the Kremlin wanted to keep invisible.

The citizens of Russia are now increasingly using local and regional elections to express their discontent, mainly over living conditions but also, especially in the big cities, violations of civil rights. In 2018, for example, four regions of the Russian Far East rejected the Kremlin's candidates for governor. This astounding turn of events was so unexpected that, this year, the Kremlin took what it believed to be all the necessary precautions. Although, this time, the results of the elections in the Far East region of Primorsky were satisfactory for the official candidate, several hundred people demonstrated in the capital of the Republic of **Buryatia** in Siberia to protest against what they saw as orchestrated manipulation from Moscow.

At the other end of the map, in Sebastopol, capital of Crimea and another politically symbolic place, Putinism has received a further **significant setback**. If, after the illegal annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014, United Russia triumphed with 77% of the votes, that support has now plummeted to 38%. A poll in April this year by **Levada Center** — the country's only truly independent institute for public opinion analysis which, of course, features in the Ministry of Justice's long list of "foreign agents"—presents a more realistic picture of the Crimea that has been so mythologised in mainstream discourse. In March 2014, 60% of its population considered that the country was on the right track (while 26% thought it was going in the wrong direction) but five years later, in March 2019, the figures changed to 48% and 44% respectively.

The "vertical of power", or the backbone of the state apparatus since the arrival of Vladimir Putin, is showing cracks. The slogan "*KrimNash*" (Crimea is ours), is no longer effective for galvanising people. It cannot compensate for a deteriorating economy, the decline in living standards, badly deteriorated roads and streets in the provinces—but not in the capital, of course—shrinking and frequently unpaid pensions (which means, according to several Russian analysts, that the state has broken the social contract with the citizens), and so on. Now there are not many Crimeas and still fewer Syrias that might help to distract people's attention from the country's social problems. These matters have come to be so important in public opinion that even media outlets close to the regime are compelled to give them quite a lot of space. In April 2018, for example, the daily *Vedomosti* **reported on** a survey carried out by the powerful state-owned savings bank, Sberbank, which showed that only 47% of the interviewees regarded themselves as part of the middle class, by comparison with the figure of 60% for 2014.

Moreover, the "Putin generation", consisting of young people who have not known the Soviet regime or any other political option, is changing. The loyalty that Putin inspired in most of Russia's youth is also showing signs of wear and tear. Hence, according to another **survey** carried out by the Levada Center in December 2018 throughout the Russian Federation, 41% of Russia's youth aged between 18 and 24 would be willing to emigrate permanently. "We need to be ready for the day after they go", Maxim told me a couple of years ago in a café near Pushkin Square, which was one of the venues of the mass protests in Moscow this summer. The fact that a Russian, and even a young man like Maxim, should be thinking about what to do in terms of a political future, and getting prepared for times of change, is surprising and certainly encouraging when one knows the mentality and political culture of post-Soviet Russia. Nevertheless, it is also true that a post-Putin regime might not be any more democratic than the present system, as some analysts like Ivan Krastev suggest. However, at the moment the only real challenge to the established order is coming not from the nationalism and conservatism that are entrenched in the heart of the Kremlin, but from a yearning for democracy.

"And all is very quiet in the graveyard", goes the refrain of a song from the late 1960s, sung by the great Vladimir Vysotsky, who was alluding to the years of *Pax Sovietica*. The present stagnation and the Kremlin's resistance to change evoke a similar feeling. With a once-booming economy now at a standstill and waning social support, the only way the regime can ensure its continuity is mere muscle (Security, Interior, and Defence) and a murky network of Putin's stalwarts. It would be one of history's bitter ironies if

Putin and his ultra-conservative nationalist, when not obscurantist, ideology should get a boost precisely from the “decadent” *Gayvropa* (a twist on the Russian word for Europa, *Yevropa*) and the “rotten West”. Supporters in Brussels and the EU member states of a return to a policy of rapprochement with Russia, for the sake of the continent’s stability and with a view to confronting more effectively the challenge represented by the United States and China, cannot and must not ignore the fact that several variations of the “strategic” relation (association, cooperation, et cetera) have already been tried without obtaining the slightest guarantee of improved security for Europe, as was demonstrated by what happened to Crimea, the only case of annexation in European territory since the Second World War. For years now, Putin’s Russia has been acting hurt because westerners do not see it as an *equal* while, at the same time, complaining that it is not recognised as having a *special* status.

However, even though the Kremlin is considerably weaker than outward appearances would suggest, the time for democratic change does not appear to be nigh. The opposition still has a long way to go if it is to broaden its social base, overcome internal divisions, and manage to enter the institutions. The conditions are not yet ripe and perhaps they will be slow to emerge but, in the meantime, it is well worth remembering that another Russia does exist.