

The Challenges of Putin's Fourth (and Last?) Term

by Andrea Aversano Stabile

Among the many crucial elections of 2018, the race for the presidency in Russia is extremely predictable. Come 18 March, Vladimir Putin seems set to secure a fourth term in office, ensuring that he will retain power in Moscow until 2024.

While all eyes are on Putin's efforts to ensure that his most credible opponents are barred from running for office, one cannot overlook the broadly negative legacy left by the incumbent. Indeed, while Putin may have no trouble in securing a new term in power, governing Russia for the next six years will be no easy task.

A number of observers have begun pointing to potential cracks in Putin's commanding influence.¹ Mounting

¹ See, for example, Konstantin Gaaze, "Between Night and Day: Who Will Control Putin's Fourth Term?", in *Carnegie Commentaries*, 21 December 2017, <http://ceip.org/2COVoo0>; and Carolina De Stefano, "Towards Putin's Last Presidency?", in *IAI Papers*, No. 18|05 (March 2018), <http://www.iai.it/en/node/8843>.

domestic pressure stemming from a slowing economy, widespread corruption and sustained tensions with the US and Europe, are not helping either.

Protests took place repeatedly in Russia, particularly in the capital Moscow, over the last years, mostly on anti-corruption grounds. Opinion polls conducted by the Russian-based Levada Center in March-April 2017, revealed that while only 38 per cent of Russians' supported the protests,² 67 per cent deemed Putin the main culprit for the widespread phenomenon of corruption in the country.³

² Elena Mukhametshina, "38% of Russians approved Navalny-backed protests - Levada Center" (in Russian), in *Vedomosti*, 6 April 2017, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2017/04/06/684383-protesti-odobryayut>.

³ Elena Mukhametshina, "Russians are against corruption in power, but they are calmly on bribes" (in Russian), in *Vedomosti*, 28 March 2017, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2017/03/28/682969-rossiyane-protiv-korruptsii>. See also Marc Bennetts, "Alexei Navalny: Is Russia's Anti-Corruption Crusader Vladimir Putin's Kryptonite?", in *Newsweek*,

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Much of the impetus for these protests comes from Alexei Navalny, a law graduate, politician and well known Russian social activist and anticorruption blogger who has risen to become Putin's most reliable contender, especially after the publication of a video, in March 2017, blaming Prime Minister Medvedev of fraud.⁴

Navalny has received much attention in the West. After announcing his candidacy in the upcoming presidential elections, Navalny has been forced to suspend his campaign due to dubious embezzlement charges, to which he has responded by calling on his supporters to boycott the vote.⁵

Since protests began on 26 March 2017, Navalny has been arrested on three occasions, the last time after he organized protests on the day of Putin's birthday.⁶ Navalny's popularity with high-skilled workers and university students has weakened some support for Putin,⁷ while there have been a number of indications that Western sanctions targeting Russian oligarchs may be leading some to hesitantly

question Putin's leadership.⁸ Western sanctions imposed on Russia in response to the crisis in Ukraine and Moscow's annexation of Crimea are furthering Russia's economic troubles, and the recent increase in oil prices is not enough to ensure long-term recovery.⁹

Seven candidates will run in the upcoming Russian elections. Polls predict that nearly two-thirds of Russian citizens will vote for Putin.¹⁰ Among the candidates, the most credited contenders are Pavel Grudinin, a tycoon surprisingly leading the Communist Party, and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy representing the Liberal-Democratic Party. However, the race between these two political figures is almost meaningless, given that overcoming the voter threshold of 15 per cent will be close to impossible for both contenders.

Anti-corruption concerns are not the only source of popular discontent in Russia. Another survey by the Levada Center in August 2017 has examined Russian citizen perceptions and priorities for change and reform in the country. Two issues top the list of

17 April 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/node/585004>.

⁴ Marc Bennetts, "Why Putin's Corruption Crackdown May Be a Pre-Election Show", in *Newsweek*, 6 March 2018, <http://www.newsweek.com/node/830704>.

⁵ Roman Goncharenko, "Alexei Navalny: The Opposition Leader Captivating Russia's Youth", in *Deutsche Welle*, 29 January 2018, <http://p.dw.com/p/2rjdz>.

⁶ Marc Bennetts, "More Than 260 Arrests in Anti-Putin Protests across Russia", in *The Guardian*, 7 October 2017, <https://gu.com/p/7bkhv>.

⁷ Clara Weiss, "What Does Russian 'Opposition Leader' Alexei Navalny Represent?", in *World Socialist Web Site*, 9 January 2018, <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2018/01/09/nava-j09.html>.

⁸ Roman Goncharenko, "US Sanctions: Nervous Russian Elite 'Realize Putin Made a Serious Mistake'", in *Deutsche Welle*, 19 January 2018, <http://p.dw.com/p/2rA2i>; Darya Korsunskaya, Katya Golubkova and Gleb Stolyarov, "For Some Russian Oligarchs, Sanctions Risk Makes Putin Awkward to Know", in *Reuters*, 30 November 2017, <https://reut.rs/2inZKOz>.

⁹ Andrew E. Kramer, "Rising Oil Prices Buoy Russia's Economy, Despite Sanctions", in *The New York Times*, 18 January 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2DiJ0xs>.

¹⁰ Roman Goncharenko, "Russia Election: Who Are Vladimir Putin's Challengers?", in *Deutsche Welle*, 8 February 2018, <http://p.dw.com/p/2sNM7>.

citizen concerns: improving living standards (25 per cent of respondents) and enhancing social protection (17 per cent), demonstrating how socio-economic issues remain the key challenge facing the government.¹¹

After an initially dormant electoral campaign,¹² Putin's presidential address on 1 March did move to make some promises in the social and economic domain. Although focusing mainly on the international posture of Russia and backed for the first time by images of Russia's military might, Putin also talked of raising the minimum wage and providing social benefits.¹³

Doubts remain on the effective implementation of these promises, however. Planned increases in healthcare and education spending face a significant lack of resources and Putin's promise to increase GDP per capita by 1.5 per cent by 2025 would require a yearly GDP growth of 7 per cent, while the best-case prediction for 2018 is 3.3 per cent.¹⁴

¹¹ Andrei Kolesnikov and Denis Volkov, "The Perils of Change: Russians' Mixed Attitudes toward Reform", in *Carnegie Commentaries*, 6 February 2018, <http://ceip.org/2BYSXP4>.

¹² Oliver Carroll, "Russia Election 2018: On the Road with Vladimir Putin's Weird, Non-Existent Presidential Campaign", in *The Independent*, 9 February 2018, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-election-2018-vladimir-putin-presidential-campaign-on-the-road-novosibirsk-vote-latest-a8202971.html>.

¹³ "Russia: Putin Promises Guns and Butter", in *Stratfor Snapshots*, 1 March 2018, <https://goo.gl/qWtdFA>.

¹⁴ Vadim Dumesh and Ben Aris, "Moscow Blog: How Realistic Are Putin's Promises to Massively Increase Social Spending?", in *bne IntelliNews*, 7 March 2018, <http://bit.ly/2FxDT1q>.

Aside from some hesitant murmurs of opposition due to the slowing economy, Vladimir Putin may also face challenges due to his weakening ability to protect core state interests and manage the complexity of the power politics in Russia. While often portrayed as having a quasi-mystical control over Russian domestic and foreign policies, the reality in Russia may be somewhat more complex.

While Putin continues to maintain a strong influence over state institutions, the bureaucracy, army and media, recent reports of surveys being conducted among Russian's armed forces to discern attitudes towards opposition movements and a willingness to "use force against persons calling for a violent change in Russia's constitutional order",¹⁵ demonstrate some degree of worry in the higher echelons in Moscow.

Two recent events may serve to further indicate the slow emergence of cracks in Putin's influence, namely the loss of accreditation of the European University of Saint Petersburg and the criminal prosecution of former Minister Alexey Ulyukaev.¹⁶ In the first case, and despite Putin's efforts and momentary success in restoring the University's license about a week after it was originally revoked, the Arbitration Court of Saint Petersburg subsequently

¹⁵ Dmitry Feoktistov, "Russian Military Tests Soldiers' Willingness to Quash Opposition Protests", in *The Moscow Times*, 6 February 2018, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russian-military-tests-soldiers-willingness-quash-opposition-protests-60404>.

¹⁶ Konstantin Gaaze, "Between Night and Day", cit.

withdrew it again three months later.¹⁷ In the second example, and for the first time under Putin, a Minister has been prosecuted for bribery.¹⁸ Although potentially orchestrated by the President himself – in an effort to eliminate a rival –, these episodes reveal that Putin's hold on power may not be that solid as it appears.

Putin's predicted fourth term will therefore be crucial to understand if these hesitant cracks in his power will continue to widen. There are as of yet no clear indications of a potential successor or a concerted effort to prepare the ground for a post-Putin Russia. For a country that has been personalized over the last 18 years, making such a transition will be no easy task.

While Putin may be tempted to modify the constitution to allow for a fifth term, or to embark in a replay of what happened in 2008 – when he stood down from the presidency to assume the office of prime minister before returning to the presidency in 2012 – such scenarios appear unlikely. Putin has refused to modify the constitution in the past and will be 78 years old in 2030, the time when he could return to assume the presidency in the event of another Medvedev-2008 type scenario.¹⁹

¹⁷ Violetta Ryabko and Markian Ostapchuk, "European University in St. Petersburg Threatened with Closure", in *Deutsche Welle*, 23 March 2017, <http://p.dw.com/p/2Zpyl>.

¹⁸ Konstantin Gaaze, "Between Night and Day", cit.

¹⁹ Shaun Walker, "2018 Election Is No Problem for Putin – But What About 2024?", in *The Guardian*, 6 February 2018, <https://gu.com/p/8xab2>.

For a country that is about to trace a pathway towards a silver wedding with its political leader, Putin's expected fourth term is likely to be rife with challenges. These range from modernizing the economy, to improving social protection of citizens, as well as tackling frictions with the EU and the US and calming the impetus of anti-corruption protests. If such predictions are correct, by 2024 – and indeed much before then – Russia will need to start thinking deeply about "not who is to replace Putin, but rather what is to replace him".²⁰

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²⁰ Andrei Kolesnikov, "Project Inertia: The Outlook for Putin's Fourth Term", in *Carnegie Commentaries*, 25 January 2018, <http://ceip.org/2nbma44>.

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