

Russia Before the Presidential Election 2018: Stable instability

Gudrun Persson and Carolina Vendil Pallin

Finally, Vladimir Putin has declared his expected candidacy to run for president a fourth time. He did so at the GAZ automobile plant in Nizhnyi Novgorod to the cheers of factory workers – “GAZ za Vas” (GAZ supports you) – in what seemed to be a staged performance. Rumours and speculation immediately filled the news and social media regarding the transition of power in 2024. The presidential election has not yet taken place – it will do so on 18 March 2018 – but no one expects anyone to win except Vladimir Putin. The latest results from a poll conducted on 1–5 December by the Levada Center indicate that he will get over 70 per cent of the votes cast.

Just this fact, that there are no other candidates in the presidential election race that are likely to be able really to challenge Putin, is indicative of Russia’s political landscape today. Elections take place, but no viable alternatives are allowed to exist. The only candidate with a remote chance, not least through his federation-wide organisation, Aleksei Navalnyi, is not allowed to run – formally due to a previous conviction for embezzlement. The real reason was clearly stated by Putin at his annual press conference on 14 December – Navalnyi and other opposition candidates are not being given the green light since they would destabilise the situation: “Do we want a replica of today’s Ukraine in Russia? No, we do not want it and will not allow it.”

The current political leadership’s focus on domestic stability and regime survival has resulted in an aggressive foreign policy and increasingly authoritarian tendencies at home. At the same time, Russia faces a number of pressing challenges as 2017, the year of the 100th anniversary of the Russian revolutions, draws to an end. Any future Russian president will need to address these issues both internally and externally.

First, the voters need to be mobilised to secure a large turnout and a convincing victory for Vladimir Putin.

An advisor to the Presidential Administration, Valerii Fedorov, stated in January 2017 that “The legitimacy of our system hinges not on the Constitution, not on the laws, but on the popularity of the first person” (i.e. Putin). This echoes Soviet times when elections were used to try to mobilise the population around the Communist Party leadership.

The president is not just the symbol but also the very personification of the political system as a whole. Although it projects an overall image of stability, this stability is inherently fragile since it rests on one person and his ability to keep the system in check. The president, the Armed Forces and the Federal Security Service are by far the most trusted institutions in Russia according to a poll from the Levada Center on 12 October. Trust in political parties is dismal, and the parliament is considered a rubber stamp mechanism for proposals from the executive. The rule of law is also weak in Russia, where police and courts are regarded as corrupt and dependent on the executive branch.

The lack of reform proposals – not least on how to get to grips with the underfinanced pension system – is another contested area. Future reform proposals will probably prove painful for sections of society. This is perhaps why it looks as if Putin’s election programme will not be announced until after the elections.

A brief tour de horizon of the legislative amendments proposed shows that Russians can expect even greater control and surveillance of the internet. This is a sure sign that free speech will become even more circumscribed in 2018. Security – at home and abroad – continues to be prioritised over health and education in the annual budget.

Internationally the situation looks far from stable. The illegal annexation of Crimea and the military aggression in Donetsk and Luhansk have created a Ukraine hostile to Russia. Countries in Russia’s



neighbourhood have become fearful of Russia's behaviour, and mistrust prevails regarding its intentions. The date of the presidential election, 18 March, has not been chosen randomly: it is the date of the annexation of Crimea in 2014 – a day when patriotic emotions ran high in Russia.

The military presence in Syria continues, despite headlines in mid-December proclaiming a withdrawal. In fact, Russia has established itself as a key player in the Middle East in recent years. Finding a political solution in Syria remains one of the most urgent challenges, and whether Russia can contribute constructively to the process is contested.

The relationship with the US has continued on its downward spiral. Putin has met his American counterpart twice this year, in the corridors of the G20 Summit in Germany in July and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation in Vietnam in November – with no apparent result. There has not yet been a formal bilateral meeting between the two presidents. There are several reasons why tensions remain high. The future of the INF (*Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces*) Treaty is one. The US has accused Russia of breaking the treaty. Russia has denied any such breach while maintaining that the US violates the treaty. When Putin commented on this in his Valdai speech in October he criticised the US for perhaps wanting to withdraw from the treaty: “If someone does not like it and wishes to withdraw from the treaty, for example, our American partners, our response would be immediate, I would like to repeat this warning. Immediate and reciprocal.”

And reciprocity seems to be the dynamic in other spheres as well. When the US forced the news outlet RT – which for years was accused of being a propaganda tool of the Russian government – to declare itself as a “foreign agent”, the Russian response was immediate. It was also reciprocal in that changes to the Russian law made it possible for the Russian Justice Ministry to force foreign media to register as “foreign agents.” As of mid-December, nine (!) US media outlets have been labelled as “foreign agents” in Russia – not so reciprocal.

Add to this the previous law on “undesirable organisations” – that now includes eleven, mostly American, NGOs – and the list of domestic “foreign agents” – now consisting of 84 Russian NGOs, like Memorial, Golos, and the Levada Center.

Finally, the efforts to secure an impressive turnout in the presidential elections also involve the younger generation. Government support for military patriotic education has increased substantially over the past few years, and is aimed at the younger generation. The Youth Army (*Iunarmii*) was created in September 2016 and is a Ministry of Defence organisation for children between 11 and 18 years old. A unit of the *iunarmitsy* marched on Red Square in Moscow on 9 May, Victory Day – less than a year after its creation – which clearly manifests the political leadership's support for the organisation.

Mobilising the first-time voters could prove a challenge, since there is a risk that the political leadership is increasingly seen as ossified. The candidates expected to get the most votes are the same as those who ran in the year the first-time voters were born, in 2000: Vladimir Putin (65 years old in March 2018), Vladimir Zhirinovskii (71), and Gennadii Ziuganov (73).

Consequently, the stakes are high – both abroad and at home. The centenary of 1917 passed without much involvement on President Putin's part. When he commented on it in Valdai he argued that “Revolution is always the result of an accountability deficit in both those who would like to conserve, to freeze in place the outdated order of things that clearly needs to be changed, and those who aspire to speed the changes up.” Finding the right balance is the perhaps the most urgent challenge for the next president of Russia.

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