

The Kremlin at dusk

Putin's popularity is waning

BY GEMMA PÖRZGEN

It's still too early to bid farewell to the era of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Yet there are increasing signs that his power is weakening. The next presidential elections are in 2024, but they appear to be already casting a long shadow. A power struggle for the country's future seems to be breaking out and its outcome is entirely uncertain.

Although Putin succeeded in achieving high approval ratings after annexing Crimea in 2014, Russian pollsters have long been noticing a very different trend. A lack of economic growth and falling wages have caused Putin's popularity to decline, says Lev Gudkov, director of the Levada Center, an independent public opinion research institute.

The president had promised to reduce the Russian economy's dependence on raw materials such as gas and oil, but this reliance is now as great as it ever was. In addition, emerging innovative sectors, such as Russia's groundbreaking IT industry, are in danger of falling victim to the country's authoritarian power elite's mania for regulation. Despotism bureaucrats are also making the lives of entrepreneurs running medium-sized companies unnecessarily difficult.

Activist Alexei Navalny seems to have struck a chord with many of his fellow citizens through his highly politicized YouTube videos, in which he denounces the widespread corruption of those in power. Internet images of the mansions and yachts of leading politicians, such as those of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, have reached a large audience, reinforcing the people's fundamental mistrust of their rulers. Many in the Russian population have long had the feeling that their society's wealth is unfairly distributed and that the power elite has been fleecing the people.

One major turning point has been the pension reform the Duma passed in 2018, which is deeply unpopular and has caused great resentment. It stipulates that men will receive their pension five years later than was previously the case and women eight years later, although the latter was reduced after fierce opposition to the regulation.

Along with taking to the streets in protest, millions of outraged Russians expressed their anger at the new regulation in online and paper petitions so that their president was obliged to address the people directly, explaining that there was no alternative to his reforms, because there are already too few workers and too many pensioners.

Against the building of churches on green spaces have become more frequent in various Russian cities, including Nizhny Novgorod, Krasnoyarsk and Chelyabinsk.

This unrest increased in the run-up to the regional elections on Sept. 8, 2019; and the Kremlin has grown increasingly nervous. A decision not to allow prominent opposition politicians to partici-

six million Russians were eligible to cast ballots – almost half of all voting-age citizens. Elections were also held on the Crimean Peninsula, which was annexed in 2014 and under international law belongs to Ukraine.

Navalny's plan of recommending his followers to vote tactically in the regional elections seems to have worked. His recommenda-

processes and prevents any real involvement by its own citizens. Many prefer to stay home at election time; as far as they're concerned, there's nothing to vote for anyway.

No one can say whether Putin will one day be replaced peacefully through either elections or retirement. At the end of President Boris Yeltsin's time in office, Putin

originated from the security services and the military, is growing in Moscow. They could set Russia on an even more authoritarian course in coming years, which would be sure to exacerbate the situation. They are an unpredictable force, not least because they are frequently in conflict with each other and this conflict often results in violence.

In addition to these internal rifts, the ongoing war in Eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea have shown that Kremlin leaders won't shrink from an aggressive expansionist foreign policy to secure their own domestic power base. Annexing Crimea made Putin very popular in 2014. According to polling data from the Levada Center, his approval ratings peaked at 89 percent in June 2015. This figure was still sustaining Putin through the 2018 presidential elections.

Russia experts fear that Putin could use a similar scenario in neighboring Belarus. The former Green party member and foreign affairs committee member Marieluise Beck and her husband, Green politician Ralf Fücks, expressed this concern recently in a widely read article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

"The country has become the newest arena for Russia's global power ambitions," warn Beck and Fücks. Largely unnoticed by the West, Putin is increasing pressure on Belarus, trying to force it into a union of states, they argue. "That would mean the end of Belarusian independence and would radically change the strategic situation in Central Eastern Europe." For Putin, a union of states with Belarus might comfortably pave the way to another term as president, they note.

Other observers may find such scenarios far-fetched, but recent history has shown that they fall within the realm of possibility for the near future.

The next few years will reveal the direction Russia takes in the dying days of the Putin era. But one thing is now certain: Not even this president can make promises for Russia's future.

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Uprising: Police officers take a protester into custody in Moscow in August 2019.

Raising the retirement age triggered so much outrage among people all over the country because the reforms mean that very few men will ever actually reach retirement age, even though life expectancy is increasing. In Russia, roughly half of all men live into their 65th year; the equivalent figure for Germany is 85 percent.

The result was repeated protests across the country. A range of different topics has since caused more occasional protests to flare up at the local and regional levels. Many Russians are unhappy and are venting their rage at their rulers in public demonstrations. There have been protests against waste dumps in northern Russia and around Moscow as well as public opposition to a church that was to be built in a park in Yekaterinburg. Sporadic protests

participate in the elections resulted in countless further protests in Moscow and other Russian cities.

Around 50,000 people took to the capital's streets to protest almost every weekend throughout July and August.

Shocking pictures of police violence against peaceful demonstrators were broadcast all over the world, images of armed members of the security forces beating and arresting large numbers of young people. These images spread quickly over the internet, which succeeded in increasing solidarity among many Muscovites and drawing more protesters to the demonstrations.

For the Kremlin, the Sept. 8 elections were a test of the electorate. The citizenry was called on to vote for 11 regional parliaments and more than 16 governors. Fifty-

million Russians were eligible to those opposition politicians most likely to win against United Russia candidates.

Moscow mayor Sergey Sobyanin declared himself satisfied, writing on his website, "In the end, it was a real political competition and one of the most emotional elections in all of recent history."

For the Kremlin, the regional election results do not justify much optimism regarding the Duma elections in 2021. Despite state propaganda in the media, the pressure on companies to force their employees to vote and the refusal to allow many opposition candidates to take part, Kremlin candidates are no longer guaranteed positive election results.

Growing numbers of Russians refuse to participate in a system that merely imitates democratic

succeeded in protecting his predecessor and his family from criminal prosecution and in seizing control of compromising material, which allowed for a peaceful transition of power. Whether Putin can be peacefully replaced in a similar way and how that might happen is entirely unclear.

The direction the country will take in coming years is equally as uncertain. There are occasional moments of hope, such as the surprising June release from prison of investigative journalist Ivan Golunov. The exchange of prisoners with Ukraine is also creating expectations that the governments in Moscow and Kiev could resume talks and find compromises, and perhaps even solutions.

On the other hand, there are indications that the influence of *siloviki*, that is, men in politics who

To talk or not to talk

Iran after the G7

BY CORNELIUS ADEBAHR

Recent meetings of the Group of Seven (G7) have been rather ominous affairs. One never knows what US President Donald Trump will make of these summits, which he regularly and openly disparages. To agree on an initiative for talks between the United States and Iran, of all countries, at the meeting in Biarritz was therefore even more surprising, including to many of those present at the posh Atlantic seaside resort.

Yet French President Emmanuel Macron's coup of inviting Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif to town paid off. Importantly, he had secured Trump's approval for this move during a tête-à-tête over lunch before the summit's official opening. Iran, in contrast, now appears to be confused as to what it can expect from the initiative, given that any high-level public meeting with a US representative is considered taboo in Iran as long as US sanctions are crippling the country.

"To talk or not to talk," that is the question for policymakers in Europe, Iran and the US. And what should they talk about? The nuclear deal and regional issues top the agenda. But is talking really worth it?

Regardless of the flurry of comments on possible talks, Iran has stuck to its policy of gradually reducing its commitment to the nuclear deal. One year after Washington pulled out of the agreement, Tehran has begun to disregard some of its limitations. After passing the agreed threshold for low-enriched uranium stocks as well as the level of enrichment itself, Iran began its "third phase" of non-compliance by engaging in previously banned areas of centrifuge research and development.

These purportedly reversible steps are meant to put pressure on the remaining parties to the deal – the EU, France, Germany and the United Kingdom as well as China and Russia (EU/E3+2) – to stick to the promises made to Iran involving oil exports and financial transactions. While the E3+2 countries maintain that the deal can be saved despite US withdrawal and Iranian (partial) non-compliance, none of the agreement's signatories has thus far triggered the official complaints procedure.

Over the summer weeks leading up to the G7 summit, the Persian Gulf was the focus of world attention. A string of attacks on tankers, often attributed to Iran, brought tensions to a boil. When Tehran downed a US drone in its airspace – so it claimed – President Trump ordered an aerial attack in response, only to call it off at the last moment. Meanwhile, Washington has begun its Operation Sentinel to patrol ships through the Strait of Hormuz, with the support of Australia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the UK.

The latter became embroiled in a tanker standoff closer to home, when it had an Iranian vessel seized for breaking EU sanctions on oil trade with Syria (the ship's destination after passing the Strait of Gibraltar). Iran retaliated by compounding a British tanker in the Gulf, and while the UK ultimately released one ship, Grace 1 (now renamed and reflagged as Adrian Darya 1), the Stena Impero is still being held by the Revolutionary Guard.

This comes as Israel has widened its attacks on Iranian-supported

groups in Syria, but also in Lebanon and – most worryingly from an American perspective – Iraq. At the same time, the Arab anti-Iran front seems to be weakening, with the UAE making the boldest moves: It has tacitly withdrawn from the Saudi-led coalition in the Yemen Civil War and sent an official delegation to Tehran to discuss maritime security, after refusing to blame Iran for sabotaging one of its tankers in May. As it happens, despite being staunchly opposed to Iran, Arab Gulf states have no inclination to go to war with their neighbor.

By maneuvering to organize direct talks between Iran and the US, the French are running a risk. Not only have other intermediaries been rebuffed before – Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe comes to mind – but now their European partners are also miffed. They fear that whatever comes out of the talks may actually weaken the current inspection regime without getting a nod from Washington for the existing deal.

Such a reversal of the American position is precisely what would

be needed to facilitate a historic encounter between the two presidents – think of Macron standing between Rouhani and Trump like Carter did between Begin and Sadat at Camp David. Could Trump really enforce a U-turn against his own advisors and dial down the "maximum pressure" campaign to help Iran "over a very rough patch," as he said after the G7 summit? No doubt, many in Israel are worried about such a change of heart, in particular Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who made his close relation with the US President a focus of his election campaign.

The greatest resistance, however, is coming from Iran itself. Immediately after Zarif's surprise visit to France, a fierce domestic debate erupted over the issue. Hardliners of all stripes lambasted Rouhani for trusting the US by signing the nuclear deal in the first place. Dismissing talks as a mere photo op without the prior lifting of US sanctions, they have boxed the president in. Not talking to the "Great Satan" has been

established policy for 40 years, so it has become a question of national pride whether – and under which heavily circumscribed conditions – such an encounter could take place.

The UN General Assembly in late September has been mooted as a possible occasion for a meeting of the two presidents. Providing an off-ramp from the current brink would be a good start, and could be achieved by suspending US sanctions in return for Iran's renewed compliance with the deal, a move that could possibly be sweetened by a credit line from EU countries to give Iran immediate economic relief. Yet the parties would also have to address more substantive issues of regional security, from commercial shipping in the Persian Gulf to the defense postures of littoral states.

Once you start talking, there's always more to discuss.

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