

# 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. Despotic 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

pate 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-

tion was that they give their votes 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

BY DMITRI STRATIEVSKI

May 20, 2019, saw the inauguration of Ukraine's sixth president, Volodymyr Zelensky. Despite his convincing results at the polls, the young politician polarizes Ukrainians like no one else can. The split for and against Zelensky cut right through the heart of Ukrainian society. His supporters and critics have pinned various hopes and concerns on their new head of state: fighting corruption vs. continuing the system of oligarchs, improving living standards vs. a further deterioration in living standards, efficient reforms vs. gridlock.

Vladimir Putin did not call to congratulate Zelensky on his election, and there is no praise for the Ukrainian president on Russian TV. Still, Zelensky is obviously taking advantage of some sort of channel to the Kremlin, as demonstrated by the recent exchange of prisoners between the two countries in September.

The central question still facing Ukrainian politics – and the issue that motivated many Ukrainians to vote either for or against the political newcomer – continues to be whether Zelensky can succeed in bringing a lasting peace to Eastern Ukraine, and if so, at what price.

Immediately after the race for Mariinsky Palace began, Zelensky was prioritizing a peaceful solution to the Donbass conflict, although he was tight-lipped on details of his peace plan in the few election interviews he gave. Zelensky's concept only started to take shape between the two rounds of elections in April 2019. His plan involved putting an end to the fighting, addressing the needs of the population in the regions not controlled by Kiev on a massive scale, resuming pension payments to "our compatriots," whom he sees as "victims of a propaganda war," and direct negotiations with Vladimir Putin. He also proposed greater involvement of Western countries in the reconciliation process.

Zelensky, however, has categorically rejected making any concessions to Russia. In his inauguration speech, which was partly given in Russian, the new head of state was blunt: "We didn't start this war. But we have to end this war." Critics have accused Zelensky of making unrealistic proposals, as any direct

negotiations with the Ukrainian side beyond the Normandy format would put Moscow in a position in which it would have to admit to its role in the conflict. For its part, the Kremlin regards the fighting in Eastern Ukraine as a civil war.

During his first 100 days in office, Zelensky demonstrated adequate toughness in dealing with Russia, even if his strategy comprised mainly verbal comments. He called on participants in the Normandy format to start negotiations as quickly as possible, while also regularly attacking Russian activities in Donbass and the annexation of Crimea.

As expected, two telephone calls between Zelensky and Putin brought no decisive breakthrough. In other words, the new Ukrainian head of state has very little practical success to show for himself thus far.

In early summer, the Normandy contact group (Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE) agreed on a path to a ceasefire, and at the end of June, troops successfully stood down at Stanytsia Luhanska.

In other combat sectors, however, the exchange of fire is still part of everyday life. Thirty-one Ukrainian soldiers have died in Donbass since the new president took office.

Other steps considered by those in Zelensky's circle – such as lifting the economic blockade and re-connecting the drinking water supply in the separatist regions in an effort to build confidence – continue to exist solely on paper. First of all, Putin has also demanded an end to restrictions on the movement of goods in Eastern Ukraine, but Zelensky can ill afford to do Putin's bidding.

Secondly, the young president must weigh his political power; he is thus seeking to avoid conflict with Ukraine's elite, who do not look favorably on contact with pro-Russian separatists.

For this reason, former president Leonid Kuchma, who now represents Ukraine in the contact group, made any lifting of the blockade contingent on several conditions, such as the return of captured Ukrainian companies to their legal

owners, including the state, which took the proposal to lift the blockade off the table.

Zelensky has found heads of state outside Russia to be willing to listen to him. He has visited Germany, France, Turkey and EU and NATO headquarters in Brussels, with the most positive feedback coming from Emmanuel Macron. The French president spoke of a "real opportunity" for change after Zelensky's inauguration and has expressed a wish for reviving the Normandy format against Putin.

Kiev could regain control over separatist areas in Eastern Ukraine within 10 to 12 months. The roadmap for doing so is not new and is set out in the Minsk Protocol. The biggest obstacles remain the municipal elections, which would have to take place in all the regions under Ukrainian law, and the stationing of Ukrainian border guards at the Donetsk and Luhansk sections of the Russian-Ukrainian border. This would mean the end of the separatists' rule.

Another bone of contention is the duration of special status for the above-mentioned regions. The Ukrainian government would agree to a transition period of five years, whereas Russia has called for an unlimited period. The exact role of places such as Vuhlehirsk and Debaltsevo in this future special administrative area will then have to be defined. This Gordian Knot will be extremely difficult to cut.

The West should not only support Zelensky personally, it should also back Ukraine as country, even though it knows these moves will not have a decisive impact. Indeed, the key to a peaceful resolution of the conflict lies in Moscow.

Zelensky has been charged with a task akin to squaring the circle, that is, of getting the Kremlin to change its course without being accused of treason at home. At the moment, there is no possible solution that will be acceptable to all parties. Although prisoner swaps have a wide media impact, they are small steps on the path to freedom in Donbass. Any successful re-integration of separatist areas into the Ukrainian Federation would be a compromise, and every compromise has its political price.

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