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# The Kremlin Emboldened

## PUTIN IS NOT RUSSIA

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“Plucking the chicken feather by feather to lessen its squawking.”<sup>1</sup> So Benito Mussolini described his path to consolidating his power in Italy in the 1920s. Incrementally, step by step, but with the end result never in doubt, he moved against Parliament, trade unions, opposition parties, and independent newspapers until Italy’s precarious post–World War I democracy gave way to a full-fledged dictatorship. Vladimir Putin heeded Mussolini’s advice. Unlike the Bolsheviks, who seized power in Russia in a coup d’état on 7 November 1917, or the KGB and Communist Party hard-liners who spectacularly failed to do so during the attempted putsch of 19–21 August 1991, Putin did not seek to grab power in a single swoop. Like Mussolini, he plucked the feathers carefully.

When Putin became acting president of Russia on 31 December 1999, he took charge of a flawed but fundamentally democratic political system. The shortcomings of Boris Yeltsin’s Russia were abundant. They ranged from the government’s heavy-handed attempts to impose control over the North Caucasus, especially during the First Chechen War of 1994–96, to the colossal political influence of unelected hyper-wealthy “oligarchs” and the flourishing of official corruption (even if Putin’s entourage later managed official malfeasance on an even grander scale). But Russia under its first post-Soviet president also featured media freedom, which extended to national television; competitive elections; strong regions; and a pluralistic legislature, which had an opposition majority for the entirety of Yeltsin’s presidency. In the spring of 1999, the State Duma—the lower house of Russia’s parliament, the Federal Assembly—fell just seventeen votes short of impeaching him. Every week millions of Russians tuned in to NTV, the country’s largest independent television network, whose flagship analytical and satirical programs, *Itogi* and *Kukly*, offered hard-

hitting criticism of the authorities. Boris Nemtsov, Yeltsin's deputy prime minister in 1997–98, recalled how during one meeting in the Kremlin the president asked him to pass the remote and turned off his television set, saying that he was tired of the negative coverage.

Vladimir Putin grew tired too, and much sooner. Four days after his inauguration in May 2000, he sent armed operatives from the prosecutor-general's service and the tax police to raid the offices of NTV's parent company, Media Most. NTV came under effective government control after a year-long campaign that deployed all the resources of the state to bring the unruly broadcaster to heel. This effort included the courts and even the energy giant Gazprom, which used its status as a minority shareholder to oust the network's management in dubious proceedings and sent security guards to take over the studios in April 2001. After silencing Russia's most prominent media voice, authorities took similar steps against those that remained. The last privately owned nationwide television channel was taken off the air by the order of Putin's information minister in June 2003, with the official explanation that "the interests of viewers" demanded this step.<sup>2</sup>

That year, 2003, was a turning point in the construction of an authoritarian state in Russia. An election assessed by international monitors as "not fair" saw the democratic opposition effectively banished from the legislature.<sup>3</sup> And the jailing of Russia's richest man, Mikhail Khodorkovsky—who had the tenacity to support that opposition and to expose growing government corruption—sent an unambiguous signal to Russia's business community that it was best to stay out of politics. By 2004, with the abolition of directly elected regional governors and new rules on parliamentary elections, Putin's regime abandoned the last pretenses of democracy and federalism.

For years now, Russia has for all practical purposes been governed as a dictatorship. The country's parliament, now lacking any real opposition presence, has become a rubber-stamp institution that fulfills neither its legislative nor its representative functions. In the unforgettable words reportedly uttered by Boris Gryzlov, the long-serving former speaker of the State Duma, "Parliament is not a place for discussion."<sup>4</sup> Elections—from municipal to presidential—have turned into prearranged rituals for extending the incumbents' terms. Opposition candidates are frequently barred from the ballot, and ballot-stuffing and the rewriting of vote tallies are routine occurrences. Not a single national election in Russia since 2000 has been assessed by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe or the Council of Europe as conforming to democratic standards.<sup>5</sup> Television networks have become propaganda bullhorns, denouncing Putin's opponents as "national traitors" and "foreign agents." Indeed, "foreign agent"—which in Russian is synonymous with "foreign spy"—is now an official designation for nongovernmental organizations that accept international funding and refuse to play by the Kremlin playbook. These now include some of Russia's most respected

groups, including the Memorial Human Rights Center; the election-monitoring organization Golos; and the Levada Center, Russia's foremost independent polling agency.<sup>6</sup>

Opposition activism, meanwhile, carries an increasingly high cost. By the latest (conservative) count conducted by Memorial, there are currently 124 political prisoners in Russia—a number approaching late Soviet figures.<sup>7</sup> They include protestors—such as Ivan Nepomnyashchikh and Dmitri Ishevsky, participants in a May 2012 mass rally on Moscow's Bolotnaya Square—jailed for taking part in peaceful antigovernment demonstrations. Opposition figures and their family members, including leftist activist Darya Polyudova and Oleg Navalny, brother of the anticorruption campaigner Alexei Navalny, are also behind bars, as is onetime corporate security officer Alexei Pichugin, the remaining hostage of the Kremlin's campaign against Khodorkovsky and his now-defunct Yukos oil company. And imprisonment is far from the worst threat facing members of the Russian opposition. On 27 February 2015, former deputy prime minister Nemtsov, who had emerged as Putin's most prominent liberal opponent, was shot dead in the shadow of the Kremlin as he was walking home over the heavily traveled Bolshoi Moskvoretsky Bridge. More than two years on, even while the immediate perpetrators of Nemtsov's killing—all of them linked to the Kremlin's viceroy in Chechnya, the militia-heading strongman Ramzan Kadyrov—have been convicted and sentenced to prison terms, the organizers and masterminds of Russia's most high-profile political assassination remain unnamed and at large.

## A Resilient Opposition

Yet even in the darkest of days, there are people in Russia who are willing to take a stand against injustice and repression regardless of personal cost. So it was in Soviet times, when dissidents, despite facing years of inhuman treatment in prison camps and psychiatric hospitals, held protest rallies and distributed self-published texts (*samizdat*) that sustained Russians' access to uncensored information and literature. As Putin's years in power ticked on, Russians increasingly began to voice their discontent at the oppressive political atmosphere by taking to the streets, the only meaningful way of making themselves heard in the absence of real elections or independent media. Small, harshly dispersed rallies in support of the freedom of assembly on Moscow's Triumfalnaya Square (a symbolic place for protest since the Soviet days) and "dissenters' marches" that drew just a few thousand at first eventually blossomed into Russia's largest political demonstrations since the fall of the Soviet Union. In response to the blatant rigging of the December 2011 parliamentary elections, more than a hundred-thousand people rallied on Bolotnaya Square—just across the river from the Kremlin. "Putin . . . you don't know your own people," Nemtsov

declared as he addressed that rally. “You don’t even understand why we are here. We are here because we have a sense of dignity. We are here because we are not slaves.”<sup>8</sup> The Bolotnaya rally was followed by an even larger one symbolically held on Andrei Sakharov Avenue, with an estimated 120,000 protesters. “I see enough people here to take the Kremlin and the White House [a nickname for the seat of Russia’s government] right now,” remarked Navalny.<sup>9</sup> For a moment, this looked like the beginning of a Russian “color revolution” following in the vein of popular uprisings that had toppled authoritarian regimes in Serbia in 2000, Georgia in 2003, and Ukraine in 2004. Putin’s regime, however, regained the initiative through a combination of rushed concessions (such as reinstating gubernatorial elections and promising to install web cameras at polling places to monitor fraud) and a fierce crackdown that included lengthy prison sentences for protest leaders and new legal restrictions on civil society.

But in 2017, against even the expectations of many opposition leaders, Russia’s protest movement reemerged in a very different form. In March, tens of thousands of people took to the streets across Russia’s eleven time zones, in 84 cities and towns from Vladivostok to Kalininograd, to voice opposition to pervasive government corruption, abuses of power, the regime’s arrogance and lack of accountability, and, most of all, the fact that the same person has been ruling the country, without fair elections or real oversight, for nearly two decades. Most protesters represented the generation that grew up under Vladimir Putin and has no memory of any other government in Russia: university and school students, young professionals, and others in their late teens and early twenties. They are the Facebook generation, the people who trust social media more than the Kremlin’s television propagandists. In classrooms across the country, in towns large and small, students openly took on their teachers who tried to talk (or coerce) them into backing down. This pressure from above did not scare them off. Neither did public warnings from the authorities about the “unsanctioned” nature of the rallies, coupled with the threat of arrest and criminal prosecution. “My friends and I thought it was our duty to go,” explained Katya, a Moscow school student who took part in the protests. “I wanted to show our government that we are not going to sit at home and tolerate what is happening. My conscience would not have let me stay at home.”<sup>10</sup>

Peaceful protesters were confronted by full-gear riot police and officers of the National Guard—a new security force established by Putin in 2016 that has specialized in dispersing antigovernment demonstrations—and these enforcers arrested participants by the hundreds.<sup>11</sup> But people still came out in large numbers. And they returned to the streets in June to repeat their message, this time in more than twice as many localities. Those in the Kremlin who may have hoped that the spring protests were a quirk were in for an unpleasant surprise. In terms of geographic extent, the 2017 protest movement is the largest that Russia has seen since the early

1990s. It is also politically diverse. The protests have united in a common effort to bring transparency to Russian politics a wide cross-section of opposition and civil society groups, from members of Khodorkovsky's Open Russia movement and supporters of Navalny's 2018 presidential bid to nonpartisan activists fighting against the government's plans for housing reform. For a growing number of Russians—not just in Moscow and St. Petersburg, the traditional centers of political activism, but also in the regions—self-awareness as citizens and yearning for respect from the state are becoming stronger than fear of repression.

These events represent an uncomfortable milestone for Putin's dictatorship. For now, the Kremlin may hold its own against the protesters with its show of force, sometimes orchestrated with international "expert" help: One of the officers directing the dispersal of the June rallies in Moscow was Colonel Sergei Kussyuk, a former commander in Ukraine's now-defunct Berkut riot police whose unit figured centrally in Viktor Yanukovich's failed attempt to suppress the EuroMaidan Revolution of 2013–14.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, the trend is clear. It is one thing to deal with a political protest tied to a specific issue such as a rigged election; it is quite another to confront an entire generation that is saying "enough." And as the coup plotters of August 1991 discovered, state coercion and even tanks on the streets can be inadequate against large numbers of dedicated people who are prepared to stand their ground. There is a growing realization among the young people of Russia that Putin's way is leading to a dead end, and that the current regime is robbing them—not only literally, through corruption on a mammoth scale involving government officials and Kremlin-connected oligarchs, but also by chipping away at the prospects for Russia's future. There is a growing demand for accountability and change, and little that Putin can do to alter these trends.

### **Distinguishing the Kremlin from Russia**

These young protesters, the faces of a reenergized reform movement, are no less Russian than Vladimir Putin. Yet after years of engaging the Putin regime, turning a blind eye to its violations of democratic norms, and often even enabling its behavior by welcoming its operatives and oligarchs with their ill-gotten money, many in the West are now making a habit of equating Russia with the Kremlin. They condemn "Russian behavior" and call for "sanctions on Russia" when in fact they are talking about a regime that has no democratic mandate from the Russian people and that—lest anyone forget—was violating the rights of Russian citizens long before it began violating international borders. Such rhetoric is not only careless: It is also a generous gift to Putin's propagandists that allows them to portray the West as "anti-Russian" and Putin as a defender of Russian interests. Western democracies should make a distinction, both in words and in action, between the nation of Russia and its unelected rulers.

They should assign the responsibility for crimes and abuses not to an entire country, but to those who actually perpetrate these acts. This principle was first applied in the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act, a 2012 U.S. law that ended a long period of impunity by imposing visa bans and asset freezes on Russian officials complicit in “gross violations of human rights.”<sup>13</sup> Boris Nemtsov, who was instrumental in convincing Congress to pass this vital measure, called it “the most pro-Russian law in the history of any foreign parliament.”<sup>14</sup>

For the sake of its long-term relations with Russia, it is also important that the West maintain dialogue not only with those in power today, but also with those who represent a different vision of Russia: the members of civil society and the prodemocracy movement. Russia is larger and more diverse than the group of people currently occupying the Kremlin. It is not for Western governments to effect political change in Russia. This can (and should) be done only by Russians themselves. But neither should the West be, in effect, abetting Putin’s dictatorship by enabling its export of corruption or by blurring the line between an autocratic regime and the county it misrules.

Both Putin’s regime and his Western apologists often draw on two entrenched stereotypes to justify his repressive rule. The first is that Putin is highly popular among Russian citizens. The second is that Russians are generally averse to democracy and yearn for a “strong hand.” Neither of those notions is true, and the latter is also insulting. With regard to Putin’s supposed popularity, it is hardly meaningful to talk about opinion polls in an authoritarian system where a large part of the population lacks access to objective information, and where respondents inevitably consider the potential risks an incautious answer might bring before telling interviewers how they feel about their government. The Kremlin’s own behavior suggests that its support is nowhere near the “86 percent” the regime often claims: A government with that level of popularity would hardly need to falsify elections, muzzle the media, or imprison opponents. Meanwhile, the facts do not bear out the well-worn claim that Russians dislike democracy on principle. Every time the Russian people have had an opportunity to choose between an authoritarian and a democratic option in a more or less free election, they have opted for the democratic choice—whether with the victory of the liberal Constitutional Democrats (Kadets) in Russia’s first nationwide legislative elections in 1906; the defeat, in the 1917 elections for a Constituent Assembly, of the Bolsheviks (who later forcibly dispersed that gathering); or Boris Yeltsin’s trouncing of his Communist opponents in the presidential election of 1991.

It has been a while since Russian citizens have had a chance to express their will in a free vote. But the civic mobilization currently underway across the country makes it clear that growing numbers of Russians reject the status quo in favor of a more modern, more democratic, and more European path. As the demographics of the emerging protest

movement show, these citizens represent the future of Russia. This is a worrying trend for the Kremlin—and a very hopeful one for the country.

## NOTES

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