

Stably Instable: Putin's Reelection Will Not Stop Social Change in Russia

by Stefan Meister

Vladimir Putin has governed Russia for eighteen years. An entire generation of young Russians has only ever experienced him at the helm of their country. Yet, it is just this generation that Putin is losing touch with as he has been seeking his power base mostly in the conservative, small-town and rural majority. Putin's reelection will not shield his government from the social change that Russia is facing – and it is this change that the West should set its hopes on.

Vladimir Putin has governed Russia for eighteen years; as a result, he can no longer pitch himself as an agent of renewal and change to the Russian people. Rather than focusing on innovation, he has therefore been staging himself as an anchor of stability in a perceptibly chaotic world, and as a leader who can provide Russians with global prestige abroad and predictability at home. It is a matter of irony that Putin is losing the younger generation by doing so, as this is the very generation who has only ever known him as their national leader. For this generation, however, what matters most is not international prestige but their own future in Russia, and it was Alexey Navalny – the only candidate who genuinely campaigned but was not allowed to run against Putin – who spoke to them. Germany and the EU urgently need to develop a long-term strategy which focuses on this generation. Rather than relying on Putin as a force of stability or a liberal minority, Germany and the EU should bank on Russia's changing society which thinks patriotically but is also globalized and interconnected.

Navalny Speaks of the Future, Putin of the Past

Following his reelection on March 18, Putin will have ruled Russia longer than Leonid Brezhnev did the Soviet Republic after Stalin. An entire generation of young Russians who have only ever known Putin as their national leader has now come of age and voted for the first time. However, Putin is facing a growing generation gap in the wake of his decision, following the 2012 elections, to pitch his government above all to the conservative, small-town and rural majority. To consolidate his power in the battle against the alleged "Fifth Column of the West", the president had driven much of the urban, mobile, and active parts of society out of the country. Meanwhile, Alexey Navalny, who was banned from running as presidential candidate, used social media campaigns to reach out to younger generations on issues such as corruption, social justice, and liberty, and he mercilessly revealed the weaknesses of Putin's system: corruption, self-enrichment, arrogance, and growing detachment from reality.

By contrast, Putin's campaign depended on a negative portrayal of present times: He put himself forward as

leading Russia in battle against alleged enemies at home and abroad, thereby fueling the fears of an aging society. Navalny, in turn, focused on positive sentiments, most notably those of younger Russians. His message: Russia is a wonderful country which you can shape and take into the future – if only the corrupt elites were no longer in power. While Putin is speaking of the past, Navalny is talking about the future. He informed and rallied his supporters via social media and his personal YouTube channel, and has managed to mobilize 200 000 volunteers in an otherwise relatively apolitical society. Among his supporters are mostly younger people who are engaging in politics for the first time and are not afraid of Russia's security forces. They do not see themselves as liberals, but as patriots. They want to have a life that is up to Western standards, while remaining distinct and different from the West.

Despite the fact that the Kremlin has kept a tight grip on power and although Navalny would have lost to Putin even in free and fair election, the political leadership cannot allow this element of unpredictability: It is bound to undermine Moscow's authority. The Russian presidential election, therefore, was a referendum on Putin first and foremost. With all other candidates merely extras, a candidate who cannot be controlled is a cause of alarm.

By comparison, the Liberal Ksenia Sobchak, was the Kremlin's perfect counter-candidate: She embodies all the negative stereotypes of the ostensibly decadent West that the controlled media have been spreading: Sobchak campaigned for LGBT rights, the legalization of drugs, as well as European values. In doing so, she virtually legitimized the conservative majority's official discourse and Putin as their candidate. Indeed, it is striking just how much access to the media and public debate Sobchak received compared to Navalny throughout the election campaign, and how little effort it seemed to take her to receive the signatures required to register her candidacy. This would not have been possible without the Kremlin's consent.

Political Stand-still in a Changing Society

Six more years of Putin will, above all, mean six more years of economic and political stagnation. A lack of investment in education, research, health, and infrastructure stands in contrast to on-going high spending for the modernization of the military, deployments in Syria and the Ukraine, as well as financial losses from state-owned enterprises as a result of corruption to appease the power elite. Answers are lacking to address the aging of the population, while skilled laborers and the active parts of

society are fleeing the country. Positive macroeconomic policies in recent years have brought down inflation and kept unemployment rate under 6 percent in 2017. At the same time however, salaries have been sinking for years, and the budget deficit, which stood at 1.7 percent in 2017, is again expected to reach 1.3 percent this year. All this means long-term stagnation, and Russia is likely to remain without any opportunities for real growth. A sudden spike in oil prices could bring some relief yet this is unlikely in the foreseeable future.

The economic and political standstill stands in stark contrast to the ongoing social changes that even Putin will be unable to stop. Russia's borders have been open for more than thirty years, and this, as well as digitalization and globalization have also pluralized Russian society. Many Russians live abroad or let their children study abroad in the very countries which Moscow's official propaganda claims to be in decline. As Russian expats stay in touch with their friends and families at home, the exchange of information simply cannot be controlled – despite disinformation campaigns. The young Russians that make up the "Generation Putin" are interconnected; they often watch the same TV shows and listen to the same music as their counterparts in the West. Like in the West, their mainstream has little interest in politics, and they are more likely to listen to their friends rather than government institutions or the media. Equally, they turn to the Internet rather than to state-controlled TV channels for news information – provided, of course, they are interested in news in the first place. Young Russians want to live like the West, and they value freedom and individual development. At the same time, they adhere to rather conservative values and Russian patriotism. Even here, there is a certain resemblance to trends in Western societies, where the neoliberal paradigm of the early 2000s is being rejected in favor of social justice and a renaissance of the family.

Accompanying Russia's Long-Term Social Change

Viewed from Germany and the EU, all these factors lead to the conclusion that Putin is, indeed, a man of the past. He cannot prevent the social transformation Russia is undergoing; it is simmering below the surface even when stifled by repression and control. Although Putin is not facing any relevant opposition that could threaten him at this moment, the growing social injustice, poor management, and corruption do not go unnoticed or without consequences. The increase in spontaneous demonstra-

tions in different parts of the country indicates that Putin will need to invest more resources domestically over the next six years.

Putin has used Russian international relations to deflect attention from the shortcomings of his domestic policy with considerable success; however, this should not keep Germany and the EU from attending Russia's social transformation in the long term. What is needed now is a positive vision for Russia's future in Europe – an outlook which looks past Putin, recognizes social trends and incorporates them into policy. Only a successful, globalized, and interconnected EU that views these trends as opportunities, and thereby helps to overcome fears can serve as a role model for Generation Putin.

In all this, it is crucial also to accept Russian society as it is, not as we wish it to be. This means, in particular, not

to focus all contacts on the liberal, yet almost irrelevant part of the opposition, but also on the rather more relevant, patriotic sections of Russian society. Understanding Russia does not mean falling for Putin's foreign policy or controlled debates. It means attending Russia's long-term social transformation despite Putin's reelection. Easing up on visa requirements and more education programs for young people could be a small start to achieving this.

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