

# Vladimir Putin's Russia is a creaking ship. Don't fall for the propaganda

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## **The united front seen during the World Cup is an illusion. Putin fears the convergence of grassroots and an elite opposition**

This summer, the World Cup created the illusion Russia was a well-run country with a contented population. But now the sports pageantry is over, Russians are back to the grey reality of everyday life, and a dire lack of prospects. And the idea of the nation being united around [Vladimir Putin](#) is fiction.

Russia is often presented in binary terms: as a country divided between Putinists and liberals, rich and poor, rural folks and Moscovites, "slavophiles" and westerners. The Kremlin's narrative hinges on the notion of a "patriotic" [Russia](#) constantly overcoming a minuscule opposition, depicted as a "fifth column" that is activated or manipulated by external forces. It is tempting for foreign observers to adopt such a black-and-white vision, in which the leader is dominant and admired while his doubters are an exception.

In fact, there are three Russias. The first is Putin's Russia, built on an oligarchic power structure and its massive propaganda machine. The second is the average man's Russia, with its many facets but also its common problems. The third is of the professional elites and upper-middle class, who benefited from the economic boom of the 2000s and now have much to lose.

The overwhelming majority of Russia's 140 million people worry about declining living standards, falling health and education levels, material insecurity, and corruption. A few weeks ago, protests erupted in many regions and across social classes against [a government plan to raise the pension age](#) (polls show that eight out of 10 Russians oppose the reform). This demonstrated a swell of mistrust in the authorities, with many people doubting that the Putin system has their best interests at heart. Furthermore, sociologists at the independent Levada Centre in Moscow point to a rising pessimism. Despite TV propaganda - or perhaps because of it - [more and more Russians say they are gloomy](#) about their personal prospects, as well as about the country's future. There is also concern about military involvement in Ukraine and Syria, and the toll these conflicts are having on young soldiers.

Putin's situation is in fact the classic problem faced by authoritarian leaders. He needs to exhibit popular legitimacy in order to convince his own inner circle, as well as potential rivals, that he's invincible and irreplaceable. A narrative of high approval ratings (allegedly between 80 and 85%) was essential to impose a "landslide victory" in the pre-determined [March presidential vote](#), which explains why a serious contender like [Alexei Navalny](#) was not allowed to run. Independent analysts and election observers are still looking into the scale of the fraud that occurred in that vote, as well as the degree of political control exerted on millions of voters. In today's Russia it takes courage to expose manipulations and debunk some of the myths attached to Putin's popularity. Real, sincere voting patterns, free of pressure and rigging, seem to have emerged as follows: over 40% of the

electorate abstained, 20% voted for a “small candidate”, and a little less than 40% voted for the president.

What about the elites? It is important to distinguish between the ruling group (Putin’s network of security services, officials and oligarchs), and the non-ruling elites and upper-middle class, which is made up of a few million scientists, intellectuals, local or regional civil servants, teachers and entrepreneurs. Against a backdrop of corruption and budget restrictions, these people often struggle to run a hospital, a school, a local administration, a factory; they manage their own business, or teach, create, innovate. It is they who bear the difficult task of acting as a mediating layer between the people and the ruling class. Many of them feel powerless but remain loyal to the regime.

Over the past decade, however, many professionals have packed their bags and [left Russia](#). Tens of thousands now live in Europe, North America, Ukraine, Georgia and a few Asian cities. They follow events in Russia closely, and many hope to one day go back and be involved in a post-Putin Russia. However hard the Kremlin may try to dismiss this phenomenon (with its “good riddance” messaging), Russia’s brain and talent drain is a new and genuine challenge for the regime.

Behind his bombast, Putin fears a combination of both grassroots and elite mobilisation. Popular complaints can become a threat if they’re amplified by intellectuals, journalists and opposition politicians. The exceptional popularity of Navalny and his anti-corruption foundation shows a new politics in the making. The [navalny.com](#) website has millions of followers. A video describing the Russian prime minister [Dmitry Medvedev’s personal wealth](#) has been watched more than 20 million times. A significant number of Navalny’s supporters are [young and fearless](#).

Domestic social anger, civic demands, youth opposition and “temporary diasporas” may converge to create difficulties for Putin. His options would then be limited: resort to more political repression, which would keep the country in a sterile deadlock, or he could seek compromise – but that would mean taking the risk of loosening his grip on power and wealth.

As it is, Putin shows no intention of leaving the Kremlin or preparing his succession, no matter the economic downsides or the discontent of the upper-middle class. There are no prominent, serious reformers in the government he appointed in May, and it’s chaired by a weakened Medvedev. Economic experts expect low growth and mounting social problems in the years to come.

Ultimately, the quest for global power may not be enough to unify a fragmented society and its various elites around the strongman. Russians expect better protection against declining living standards, and many suspect the purpose of the pension reform is to divert yet more money towards military expenditure and personal enrichment. The regime tries to deflect attention from a depressed domestic economy by provoking confrontations with the west, but it is costly, unproductive and not very popular. Putin will stick to this course, though, rather than take the risk of liberalisation and accountability.

Russia’s leadership, worried elites and pessimistic society are in an unstable equilibrium. The three Russias are becoming more aware of how precarious the situation is. They’re watching each other closely. Putinism as a formula for stability has run its course.

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