

# Putinism at Twenty - In Russia, the Fight Is Alive

Monday 26 August 2019, by [MATVEEV Ilya](#) (Date first published: 21 August 2019).

**Vladimir Putin's authoritarian regime claims to offer order in place of post-Soviet chaos. Yet the crude repression of opposition demonstrations shows the regime's fear of the rising popular discontent.**

## Contents

- [Putinism at Twenty: No Room](#)
- [Protests in Moscow: Grassroots](#)
- [Strategic Alternatives for the](#)
- [Cracks in the Wall](#)

On August 3, the gentrified streets of central Moscow were filled with angry youth protesting the removal of independent candidates from elections to the city parliament. Yet police quickly moved to break up the demonstration. When a group of protesters attempted to flee the state forces, they were forced into a cul-de-sac. Some people managed to find their way into an office building. Others defiantly stood their ground, only to be violently detained by masked cops in full riot gear.

Recent weeks have seen similar protests each Saturday in the Russian capital. Some have been "sanctioned" by the authorities and attracted large crowds. The biggest one to date, on August 10, was attended by 60,000 people. Most Saturdays, however, the protests are "unsanctioned," and are brutally broken up by the riot police and the National Guard. Though the protests are strictly peaceful, they are met with overwhelming force. The result has been about 3,000 short-term detentions, several hundred administrative arrests of up to thirty days, and thirteen people charged with taking part in "mass riots" (a crime incurring up to eight years in prison).

If Russians are sometimes imagined passive in the face of authoritarian rule, in fact clashes have spread across the country. In the northern Arkhangelsk region, locals have camped in the woods for many months protesting the construction of a landfill that would spell disaster for the local ecosystem. In Ekaterinburg, a large city in the Ural mountains, citizens succeeded in a drawn-out battle with the Russian Orthodox Church, which wanted to build a cathedral on the site currently occupied by a public park (characteristically, the Church colluded with local tycoons; the cathedral was part of a large development that included offices and luxury apartments). Tower crane operators in Kazan staged a strike over pay and safety conditions. In what became a citywide protest, they were joined by activists protesting the construction of a waste-burning plant as well as homebuyers defrauded by the local developers.

Faced with growing protests and declining legitimacy, the regime has increasingly abandoned the complicated machinery of "managed democracy," resorting to repression and crude propaganda. On July 27, even as the police were brutalizing demonstrators in Moscow, TV screens showed the eerie spectacle of Vladimir Putin regally surveying a naval parade in St Petersburg. With their fondness for the postmodern imagery of imperial splendor, the authorities seem almost deliberately to be

recreating the atmosphere of early twentieth-century Russia with the out-of-touch elite ruling over a discontented population.

## **Putinism at Twenty: No Room for Maneuver**

At its core, Putin's regime has always been a class rule of the superrich. In return for not challenging Putin politically, the oligarchs got to save and expand their privatized empires. They also won the neoliberal reforms they needed, such as the new Labour Code that essentially prohibited strikes. Since the mid-2000s, the business elite had to make room for Putin's cronies, mostly with a background in the security services, who took over the expanding state-owned sector of the economy. These two elite groups continue to be the main beneficiaries of Russia's political-economic order.

Upon this basis, a superstructure of "managed democracy" was erected. Regional political machines that emerged in the 1990s were forcibly centralized to produce reliable electoral majorities for Putin and United Russia, the ruling party. A few other political forces were allowed to exist as "systemic opposition": harmless, yet a necessary part of the democratic façade. Among these forces, the Communist Party had the strongest organization on the ground. However, its role was not functionally different from other "systemic" parties: to absorb discontent and produce additional stability for the regime. Through a series of purges, the party leadership got rid of all leftist dissidents. This allowed the party to play its role of fake opposition, essentially betraying its core electorate of elderly Soviet patriots over and over again.

"Managed democracy" worked as planned in the 2000s. Starting from a low base, as well as taking advantage of factors like the devaluation of the currency, high oil prices, and the easy availability of credit on international capital markets, the economy was in high gear. After the traumatic 1990s, the population retreated into private life to mend its wounds. The contrast with the chaotic first decade of Russia's post-Soviet history, constantly emphasized by the Kremlin-controlled media, was enough to establish wide passive support for the regime.

The "nonsystemic," that is, authentic, opposition was vanishingly small. Its rallies never attracted more than a few hundred people. The authorities still made mistakes, such as the dogmatically neoliberal welfare benefits reform of 2005 that caused spontaneous mass protests all over the country. However, abundant oil profits allowed them to drown such mistakes in cash.

The economic crisis of 2008–2009 was the first wake-up call for Putinism. It exposed the fundamental vulnerability of the Russian economy to the oil price fluctuations and the volatility on the international capital markets. However, the accumulated reserves allowed the government to implement a massive stimulus program (saving the indebted oligarchs in the process), and the oil prices quickly rebounded, steering the economy back to growth.

The next challenge was political. Despite the growing economy, the regime's support shrank in 2010–2011. One reason for this was the failure of the authorities to transform a primitive and oil-dependent economy after the crisis, even though the government of Dmitry Medvedev promised a broad program of "modernization." In 2008, Putin had to step down as president due to the constitutional limit of two successive terms. He made politically weak Medvedev his placeholder, while himself occupying the position of prime minister. In November 2011, Putin suddenly announced his return to the presidency. While most people expected this, the abruptness and peremptoriness of the announcement still angered and frustrated many. A week after the announcement, parliamentary elections were held. After acting as electoral observers or witnessing crude electoral fraud on YouTube, people went to the streets, launching the biggest opposition

movement in Russia since the early 1990s.

The movement's strength, peaking at 100,000 participants in late 2011, clearly surprised the authorities. The era of mass political apathy was over. After some hesitation, the authorities responded with a wave of repression not unlike the one we see today as well as an ideological offensive. The Kremlin espoused various nationalist, conservative, and traditionalist tropes, moving closer to the right-wing populists across the world — so close, in fact, that it tried to support, organize, and lead them.

However, this solution did not prove to be particularly effective domestically. People still took to the streets, and the authorities' approval ratings continued their downward drift throughout 2012 and 2013. Furthermore, by the end of 2012 the economy slowed down despite high oil prices, entering a period of stagnation which it has yet to escape.

The most likely reason is accumulated underinvestment. In the previous period, it was enough to relaunch and modernize Soviet-era factories to achieve growth. However, by the end of the 2000s this resource was exhausted. After a temporary reprieve brought about by the crisis, the economy quickly reached its limit of productive capacity. Characteristically for the comprador bourgeoisie, the oligarchs' windfall profits were converted into luxury real estate in London, not large-scale investment projects in Russia.

The events of 2014 both helped the Kremlin and exacerbated its long-term problems. The annexation of Crimea generated nationalist support for the regime even as stagnation turned into recession and the government implemented tough austerity measures (earning praise from the IMF). The unending stream of propaganda branded the opposition as pro-Ukrainian, "national traitors," and "fifth columnists." This seemed to finally do the trick: political resistance to the regime faded, though not for long.

In 2017, opposition activist Alexei Navalny's exposé of Dmitry Medvedev's corruption, which currently has 31 million views on YouTube, launched a fresh wave of protests. By this time, Navalny established himself as the uncontested leader of the "nonsystemic" opposition. Unlike other liberal figures who often had elitist tendencies, he embraced a direct populist message of "the people" vs. "the elite." His meticulous and inventive investigations of high-level corruption proved to be the perfect vehicle to communicate this message, providing it with cogency and authenticity. However, like other populists, Navalny is essentially unaccountable to his supporters; his movement is extremely leader-centric. Furthermore, beyond the populist core his politics oscillates between left and right. Recently he has incorporated some left-wing tropes, attacking the oligarchs not just for their corrupt ties with the regime, but also for the poverty wages at their factories. However, his rhetoric is not completely free from nationalism either. Although the openly xenophobic statements of his early days are gone, he still advocates for the tightening of the border regime with the Central Asian countries.

The mood in 2017 was different from 2011–2012. Years of crisis and declining real incomes put center stage the direct confrontation with the country's absurdly rich and corrupt elite, giving additional force to Navalny's message. Furthermore, the new generation taking part in the protests grew up not in the apathetic 2000s, but in the politicized 2010s. Having an interest in politics is increasingly common among the youth.

Despite Navalny's efforts to stage a boycott, the electoral machinery still produced a 77 percent vote for Putin in 2018. However, right after the elections the government rolled out the final part of the austerity program: raising the retirement age from fifty-five to sixty for women and from sixty to sixty-five for men. The political strategists in the Kremlin correctly assumed that the pension reform

would be the government's most unpopular policy in decades, perhaps even since Putin's coming to power in 1999. The reform was carefully orchestrated to coincide with the beginning of the new political cycle and the 2018 soccer World Cup held in Russia. Nevertheless, it had a direct and powerful effect: the "Crimean consensus," already bruised by the 2017 protests, was gone. Polls, as problematic as they are in an authoritarian regime, show that the leadership's approval ratings have crumbled to pre-Crimea levels. Government propaganda lost much of its effect: people grew tired of the manic nationalist frenzy on TV.

The Kremlin's strategy in carrying out the pension reform was to shield Putin personally from blame as much as possible. This required throwing the government and the United Russia party under the bus. Regional parliaments were required to issue explicit statements of support for the reform, further damaging the ruling party. As a result, regional political machines cracked under pressure despite electoral manipulation and fraud: United Russia lost governor's races in four regions, an unprecedented result. The party's name became toxic: pro-Kremlin candidates hid their party affiliation and claimed independent status whenever possible. The situation did not improve in 2019, when a new round of regional elections had to take place, including the elections to the Moscow parliament.

### **Protests in Moscow: Grassroots Mobilization and Electoral Politics**

Elections in Moscow have always posed a challenge for the regime. While Yuri Luzhkov, Moscow's mayor in 1992-2010, constructed a particularly powerful and vertically integrated political machine, the city gradually developed a strong liberal constituency. In 2013, Alexei Navalny challenged Luzhkov's successor Sergey Sobyenin in the mayoral race and received 27 percent of the vote. Sobyenin narrowly avoided the second round of elections only by resorting to crude electoral fraud. During the municipal elections in 2017, various opposition forces managed to get about 200 seats, or 15 percent of the total. Municipal assemblies represent the lowest level of power in Russia. In Moscow, they have particularly little influence. Nevertheless, opposition deputies threw themselves into local, often mundane problems of their districts, developing ties with the population of the city.

The overall decline of United Russia's popularity during the last year was particularly pronounced in Moscow with its strong liberal tendencies. Against this background, the authorities had to prepare for the elections to the city parliament, called Moscow Duma. The elections will take place on September 8.

In the context of the developing political crisis, the authorities decided to nominate all their candidates as independents, hiding their United Russia affiliation. This alone gives a clue of the regime's problems in Moscow. However, lack of support for United Russia was not Sobyenin's only challenge. The opposition put forward their own candidates in about a third of Moscow's forty-five electoral districts. A few of them are members of Navalny's team, others are liberal politicians, mostly with municipal experience. The Left has its own candidate in one of the districts, Sergey Tsukasov. A municipal deputy with deep ties to the local population, he enjoys the support of several leftist groups such as the Russian Socialist Movement, an organization with a few dozen members in Moscow whose leading activist, a famous poet and musician Kirill Medvedev, also ran (unsuccessfully) in the municipal elections two years earlier.

Faced with this conjuncture, the city authorities did not have many choices. Eventually they chose the path of maximum escalation. All the opposition candidates were blocked from taking part in the election. This provoked the street mobilization, the biggest one since 2011-2012. The response was extremely repressive: mass arrests and criminal charges. Almost all the independent candidates are

currently detained. Navalny is under administrative arrest as well. It is very likely that tens of people will get real prison sentences. However, as of today, street protests continue.

Furthermore, the authorities did not really solve their electoral problem. After all the opposition candidates were blocked from participating in the election, Navalny along with several other prominent figures urged their supporters to vote strategically for the most popular registered candidate not on the Kremlin list. Ironically, in most districts this means the candidate from the Communist Party. Fearing retribution from the Kremlin above all else, the party did everything it could to distance itself from the protesters — even though they practically handed it tens of thousands of votes by endorsing its candidates. Nevertheless, while the party as a whole will probably remain deeply subservient to the regime, some of its candidates just might acquire the taste for independent political action.

## **Strategic Alternatives for the Left**

The current protests in Moscow present both advantages and disadvantages for the Left. On the one hand, their embeddedness in grassroots municipal politics is aligned with the strategy and experience of socialist groups in the city in recent years. On the other hand — and this should be stated clearly — the protests have certain class tendencies. The geography of the liberal vote in Moscow is highly correlated with real estate prices, testifying to the fact that is usually the middle class that votes against United Russia and for the opposition candidates such as Navalny.

Nevertheless, most leftist groups decided to take part in the protests, including Sergey Udaltsov's Left Front, despite its recent drift towards pro-Donbass "patriotic left." The reason is simple: precisely due to the Left's influence, the movement has the chance to broaden its social base — and thus become more effective. On the local level, the Left in Moscow emphasizes the inequalities in access to education and health care as well as municipal corruption that hurts working-class neighborhoods.

In its quest for "global city" status, Moscow government has made heavy investments into the gentrified central areas, yet it has largely neglected the public welfare sector. In 2014, the ruthless neoliberal restructuring of the city's health care system led to mass protests, with the Left becoming an important part of the anti-austerity movement. These experiences as well as the experience of fighting against the pension reform have shaped the Left's current strategy and Tsukasov's electoral platform.

As the Russian Socialist Movement claims in a statement, "Today we are fighting not only for fair elections, but for the participation of the masses in politics — with the help of elections, strikes, rallies, and all forms of self-organization ... The duty of the left is not only to unconditionally support the popular movement, but also to bring into the protests demands for social justice, and the complete removal of big business from power. The RSM calls on all democratic forces, free trade unions, and ecological and urban protection movements to a coordination of actions, to broadening the geography of the protests and to mutual solidarity."

## **Cracks in the Wall**

The ongoing political crisis in Moscow is only the latest manifestation of the regime's growing weakness. The political machinery of the "managed democracy" experiences more and more breakdowns. Furthermore, the opposition has become skilled in combining street protests and

strategic voting to cause maximum political effect.

Nevertheless, in its weakened state, the regime is more dangerous than ever before. It does not hesitate to use any degree of intimidation to simply crush all protest behavior instead of accommodating it. Such tactics usually makes authoritarianism less stable and resilient in the long run, yet at tremendous cost to the members of the opposition movement. The fight in Russia brings tragedy and pain, yet its participants do not lose tenacity and hope.

**Ilya Matveev**

---

---

**P.S.**

- Jacobin, 08.21.2019:

- <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/08/russia-opposition-repression-vladimir-putin>

- ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ilya Matveev is a researcher and lecturer based in St Petersburg, Russia. He is a founding editor of Openleft.ru and a member of the research group Public Sociology Laboratory.