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Russia: Citizen Demonstrations in an Electoral Autocracy

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Abstract

Last summer, Moscow was the scenario for the major political demonstrations ever since the broad circle of protests from 2011 to 2012. The mobilizations erupted from the blockade of the authorities to the registration of opposition candidates for the local elections in Moscow. As completion of a series of citizen protests, spread throughout the country for different causes –the project to build a church in a public park in Yekaterinburg, the settlement of a garbage dump in Arkhangelsk, the reform of the pension system, the imprisonment of journalist Ivan Golunov– these actions represented a modest but real challenge to the political regime. Which context, development and possible implications we propose to analyze below in closed relation with the nature of “managed democracy” methods within Russia's regime of electoral autocracy, as well as the upgrading of technological tools towards both consequences: political pluralism and civic practice’s constrain.

Keywords: Russia, electoral autocracy, authoritarianism, Putinist rule, political demonstrations, citizen protests, local elections

The Context: 20 Years of Putinist Rule

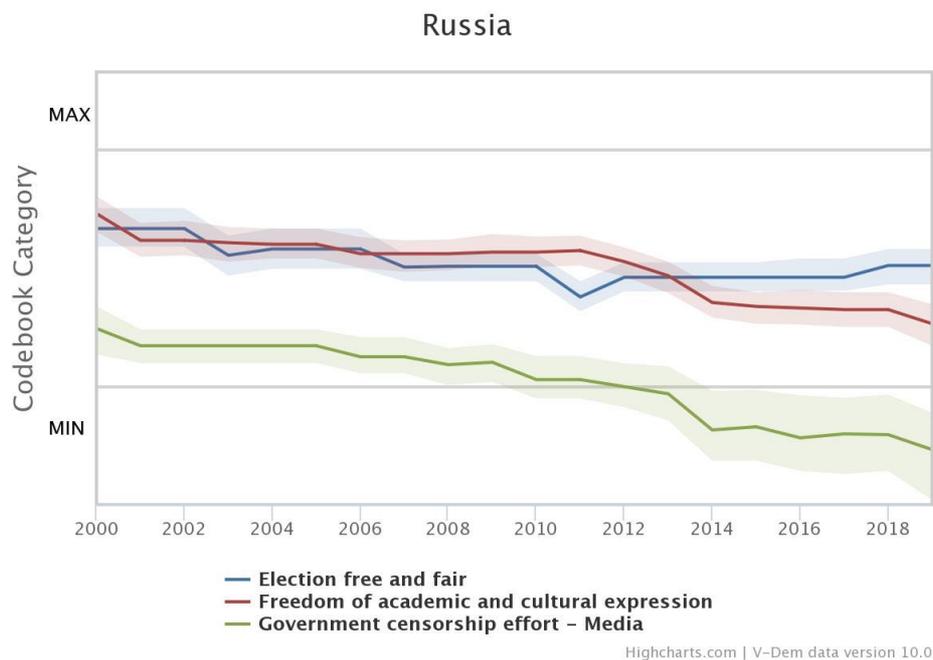
The Russian regime lies increasingly in the figure of Vladimir Putin, ranging between different forms of authoritarianism (competitive/closedone) becoming at present an consolidated electoral autocracy.ⁱ Unlike nondemocratic regimes built after a revolution in which the state and its political institutions were simultaneously constructed, modern hybrid authoritarianism was slowly shaped onto a framework of democratic institutions, which were, in the case of Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, almost wholly imported from the West.ⁱⁱ Digging beneath layers of authoritarian practices, we can still find these democratic institutions and the people using them for democratic ends.

This combination has been also assisted by the fact that the rise of Putin, 20 years ago, coincided with an economic recovery, benefited from the growth of hydrocarbon from the low oil price of \$10 per barrel and climbed over the next decade to a peak of about \$150. Inexorably, this effect increased the foreign and private investment and consolidated the national reserves and doubled the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita from 1998 to 2008.ⁱⁱⁱ Considering the permanent budget crisis in which the government had fallen after the collapse of the Soviet Union, together with the fall in life expectancy, personal incomes and consumption increased noticeably in the subsequent period.^{iv}

Inglehart and Welzel have indicated a causal relationship between socio-economic development and democracy where the sequence works mainly from economic development to democratization (2009: 9). During early stages, authoritarian states are just as likely to attain high rates of growth as are democracies. Up to a certain level, Russian ruling parties have demonstrated a solid resilience and ability to “monopolize mass support even in the conditions when the national economy deteriorates” (Golosov, 2016: 537). And they are able to do so precisely given the inhibition of democracy in favor of a concentrated economic power within elites, preventing reforms from extended rights and liberties (Bernahagen, 2009). The resentment and frustration have shaped the mentality of the majority of citizens with priority to economic security but gradually including questions of democratic rights and freedoms.^v

The roots of the “superpresidential power”^{vi} in Russia are based in a mixture of historical, institutional and cultural grounds. First, the traumatic impact of liberalization of the nineties; which impoverished the middle class and dislocated the national economy. Second, the precarious -true but weak- build up of Rule of Law and electoral democracy; specially after the crisis of 1993 between the Duma and President Yeltsin. Third, the deep tradition of popular acquiescence for personalistic rule -from the czarist Empire to Soviet

times- rooted in national political culture. In this context, V.Putin managed to become superpresident trying to restore the State’s control and capacity, rebuilding the traditional links between a powerful center and subordinated regional and local authorities and reinvented -under the new condition of postcommunist society- the social contract of power with citizenship. Its promises -and results- were integrated within an agenda of “a firm hand”, national pride, economic stability for the entrepreneurial and creative classes and paternalistic protection of the poor and older people. Then, the key factors that provide superpresidential power rest on the design and mechanism of Vertikal of Power: institutional control of the party system -with a “party of power”^{vii} and minor allies- , neutralization of the opposition - by a mixture of cooptation, repression and illegalization- and a reinforced trade off with capitalistic groups -including oligarch- and workers, under a State capitalism model. To illustrate how autocratization unfolds in Russia -a remarkable case within the “third autocratic wave” (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019)- we have graphed indicators measuring freedom and fairness of elections, freedom of the media and freedom of academic and cultural expression, during last twenty years.



Source: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/CountryGraph/>

Politically, the State regained the traditional centrality in the collective life, but – at least during the first mandate of Putin – refrained from imposing any official ideology and to interfere in the life and initiative of its citizens. At that time, Putin appeared to be an

effective bureaucrat with a security services background, a market-oriented statesman and pragmatist without ideological pretenses. In this sense, his Kremlin's team has been extremely skillful at mobilizing national economic resources, but on the other hand, has travelled a complicated path to the privatization of Russian politics. Specially, during the 2012 protests and the annexation of Crimea (2014) as a watershed moment, the system became increasingly authoritarian, personalized and oriented by a Chauvinist nationalism as official discourse. Putin went from being the pragmatic manager, focused on internal modernization and selective cooperation with the West (2000-2009) to becoming an anti-liberal, revisionist, expansionist and statist crusader (2009-2019), inside and outside the Russian borders. Kirill Rogov explains the purposes of this leadership of a "strongman" type as:

...a naked sermon of anti-liberalism and anti-Westernism, a reevaluation of the "borders of the Russian world" — through the formation of a band of confrontation and distrust around Russia, and the building of a "nationally oriented elite" — into the absolute supremacy of the security forces and the powerful oligarchies, which constantly demand benefits, preferences and cash injections. (2019, p.8)

The confluence of these factors has been translated to everyday nationalism's practices in Russia by Karine Clément, who confirms by surveying, a growing sense of social division and inequality. The author affirms that people "have become better at figuring out the society they live in; they identify deep social, rather than national or ethnic, divisions" (2019: 160). The study also states that this group represents a high proportion of those who denounce the rising social inequality.^{viii}

The Protests: Precedents and Development

“I am 20 years old and in my whole life
there hasn't been a single day of freedom”

Protester, Moscow, August 10th, 2019

During the 90s, the broader segment of the post-Soviet ordinary people -who publicly needed or demanded social security from the then newly democratic and capitalist oriented market- were seen as ‘losers’, supposedly by their own fault, as they allegedly lacked the personal qualities to fit in the new era. The tone of the media while reporting protest actions depicted their members as ‘fools’, ‘lazy’, ‘reactionary’, ‘irresponsible’, or ‘extremists’. This stigmatization was also pursued by government officials and liberal intellectuals (Danilova, 2014; Clément 2019).

Yet the narrative seems to be reversing in face of the new populist and patriotic discourse developed by the Kremlin during the last confrontational events in the country – in 2005 against the social welfare ‘anti-people’ reform, in 2011-2012 as reaction to ‘For Fair Elections’ movement, in 2014 against the annexation of the Crimea and the ones today, related to the electoral dynamic. The current discourse of the Putin administration forms a technocratic message coupled with paternalistic, populist and nationalist values, in ostensible contrast to the neoliberal economic reforms of two decades ago. As a result, Putin’s rhetoric turns back to the ‘hard-working’, ‘conscientious’ and ‘ordinary citizens’.^{ix}

Regardless the instrumentalist aspects of the populist semantic resembling, social and political recognition as well as the consciousness and sense of social inequality, is higher than before. Instead of creating national consensus, the discourse of the ruling elite has produced deep divisions and social awareness; ultimately proving critical patriotism, insufficient to avoid critical judgment and, even less, disagrees in a form of grassroots initiatives, labor protests or anti-corruption mobilizations. In this regard, it can be proposed the logic of Ernesto Laclau (2005) on the condition for a new discourse to emerge. In the traditional official discourse “the people” as empty signifier has finally come to a different understanding, serving to generate a sense of collective belonging and solidarity among many citizens from the bottom and, eventually, leading to recover a degree of recognition and self-esteem outlines “from below”.

The unbalanced reception is perhaps better demonstrated by how the official discourse conveys politicization and subjectivation. In this respects, Leah Gilbert explains

the fragmentation of social instances ‘from above’ by using the Russian words *nashi* (‘ours’) against *chuzhi* (‘others’) (2016: 1572). Policies and rhetoric of the Russian government aim to signalize this dichotomy, where the first ones remain loyal or neutral or exercise an organic critic, and therefore, have government connections such as funding, influence and seats in the Public Chamber. The second ones, however, are under greater government oversight, are systematically marginalized or targeted for demobilization methods that include public accusations –as either unpatriotic coalition or tools of foreign governments–, judicial proceedings and executive repression. With such a background, the conditions for an oxygenated civic activism, in terms of international citizenship rights, have gradually deteriorated in Russia. As the indicators of the V-Dem project reflect, the declining levels of population involvement in social organizations and mobilizations, as well as the increasing State control and repression over those, show a gradual but sustained autocratization of the country.



Source: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/CountryGraph/>

And yet, from the street level, the vitality of grassroots activism is currently growing in Russia and takes many different forms and meanings beyond the apparent dichotomy *pro vs. anti-Putin*, or *dissention vs. loyalty* positions. Activism has proved practically oriented and oppositional, supportive while also resisting depending on the positions embedded in everyday life experience. Therefore, activism in form of “everyday resistance” (Scott, 1986), “cultural citizenship” (Yusupova, 2018) or “pragmatic politics” (Clément & Zhelnina, 2019) considers a wider scope of “variable forms of multi-vocalism” (Kaufman, 2016) that goes

from skeptical or convenient declarations within the official public sphere to overt dissent supported by consolidated social movements. This can take place publicly, half-hidden or within the confidence of small areas of commonality, but always ‘learning’ activism while critically/humorously confronting power.^x

In addition, and despite the greater State’s Internet regulations and its uses as instrument of social control, Russian civil society has gained effectiveness in the use of new communication, information and mobilization technologies. Citizen innovation in areas such as coordination of protests, alternative media coverage, mutual aid networks, surveillance of State action and election coverage has allowed organized civil society to be better prepared for the climate of the current cycle of protests; they have also allowed the opposition to find creative modes for subverting the Executive’s rules.

From 2012 to 2017, the “non-systemic” opposition remained excluded from the political system and lost social drive and institutional presence before the regime’s two-pronged strategy of mobilizing/demobilizing *nashi/chuzhi* civic groups and political coalitions (Hashim, 2005; Lipman, 2005; Jordan, 2010; Taylor, 2011; Horvath, 2013; Lansky & Suthers, 2013; Crotty & Ljubownikow, 2014). According to this view, on one hand Putin’s policies have backed organizations that have been either apolitical or supportive of the regime’s agenda while, on the other, have undermined organizations that have proven to be openly critical, have been funded by foreign donors or pursued liberal agendas.

Since Putin’s early days in power, the government had enacted a variety of initiatives to assert the control over society. It is pertinent to remember the establishment and strengthening of so-called GONGOs (government organized non-governmental organizations), parallel to the hardening of the official rhetoric towards foreign-sponsored NGOs. Furthermore, the enactment in 2006 of the controversial NGO law ‘On Introducing Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation’ that enhanced the State’s supervisory power over organizations. In order to make things less transparent, in 2012 the State approved a new law requiring domestic non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in receipt of funding from outside Russia and perceived to be engaging in “political” activity, to register themselves as “foreign agents”. This led to an overall reduction of NGO activities with critical agenda on one hand, and on the other, the domination of the remaining NGO activity by organizations funded and controlled by the State; strategy perceived by international bodies such as the Council of Europe as a crackdown on civil society activity in the country.^{xi}

In this scheme of “managed democracy” (Wolin, 2017; Csillag & Szelényi, 2015), some other political forces were allowed to exist as “systemic opposition”: harmless coalition being a necessary part of the democratic facade. Among these forces, the Communist Party had the strongest organization on the ground; however, its role was not functionally different from other “systemic” parties: absorbing discontent and producing additional stability for the regime. Moreover, through a series of purges the party leadership threw off all left-wing dissidents allowing them to play its role of false opposition, essentially betraying its central electorate of Soviet patriotic elders over and over again.

In 2017, non-parliamentary fractions participated in the municipal elections given the official certainty of Kremlin’s uncontested hegemony that made the contest predictable in certain extent, and partially relaxed the State’s political control. That said, some experts such as Cameron Ross (2018) warned of forms of electoral bad practice that continued to be in effect, such as “coercing or bribing voters to turn out and vote for United Russia (UR), promoting ‘carousel voting’ (multiple voting by groups of mobilized citizens), or ballot stuffing” (2018: 75). Nevertheless, in this opportunity, much more attention was paid to manipulate the registration process in favor of UR. The deteriorated image of the official party and the understanding that fraudulent methods could revive the protests against the regime, focused the authorities on working on massaged obstacles to competitive elections, such as the “participation barrier” (Schulmann, 2017: 2).^{xii}

Several legal modifications were made in the early stages of the process to ensure that opposition parties and candidates were prevented from competing in regional assembly and gubernatorial elections. Analysts have reported tactics such as selectively applying laws on candidate nomination in order to disqualify undesirable oppositionists, packing the ballot with spoiler candidates to generate the appearance of competition, or pressuring state employees and other vulnerable voters to support regime-preferred candidates (Smyth & Tuvorsky, 2018; Gorokhovskaia, 2019). However, perhaps the sharpest strategy was the concurrence of official candidates of UR as *samorydvizhentsy* meaning “independent” or “self-nominated” in order to manipulate the nominations before voter’s critics. This effort to alter information and representation had the potential to uncover the real affiliations of candidates who, happened to be influential members of the community, run for UR (Gorokhovskaia, 2018: 985).

Also, the previous representation of the official candidates in the local parliaments, at least those who received 3% of the votes in elections to the State Duma, exempted them of collecting signatures as a legal requirement for their application and, therefore, qualifying

by default.^{xiii} Meanwhile, true independents out of civil society and emerging parties needed to collect about 6000 signatures per candidate within a month. Moreover, numerous candidates have been prevented from standing in the elections by pointing out mistakes that would deny their registration or disqualification including dictating signatures invalid, errors in the nomination forms or in the personal information provided. The tendency in these exclusions has followed historically a very judgmental scrutiny invalidating even typographical error and showing an uneven playing field between the “party of power” (United Russia), the others “systemic” forces (Communist Party of the Russian Federation, Just Russia, and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia) and the “non-systemic” opposition (Ross, 2014, 2018).

In 2019, the dominant party UR, within its balanced arraignment between the federal center and other political and economic elite actors, repeated on a larger scale the formula to camouflage its candidates within a non-transparent mechanism and legal networks: in total 233 concurrent were accepted, while 57 were rejected, most of them from the independents. Such a bias and deficit in citizen representation is explained if we consider that 38 of the 45 seats in the Moscow City Council are enrolled in the “independents” fraction close to UR which, even in conservative surveys, did not exceed 37% of support in the capital. To this we should add another 30% acceptance of the other parties represented in the capital government, leaving a third of Muscovites with no political option within the current format. Golosov in his study of authoritarian regimes explains the later by affirming that “long-standing authoritarian regimes tend to create political settings in which all actors, including loyal quasi-opposition parties, tend to occupy stable, semi-permanent niches” (2016: 544).

As Kaya and Bernhard note, there are two opposing perspectives on the impact of elections on the stability and longevity of authoritarian regimes, the first of which they label “electoral authoritarianism” and the second “democratization by elections” (2013: 735). On the basis of the first perspective, elections play a major positive role in stabilizing and strengthening authoritarian regimes. In contrast, according to scholars who support the second perspective, elections are risky for authoritarian rules, as once undertaken they ‘can establish a path to incremental democratization’ (Ibid). Ross and Panov have also identified stable electoral patterns that can be placed in one of four groups across Russian regions: “hegemonic authoritarian”, “semi-hegemonic authoritarian”, “clearly-competitive authoritarian” and “moderately-competitive authoritarian”. The authors bring this matter to affirm that, despite the highly centralized state’s power, territories and local politics still help to shape electoral outcomes within higher levels of political pluralism and contestation up to

less competition and domination of the political landscape by the party (2019: 355-80). Even when the regime has been able to mitigate the risks associated with elections by manipulating political institutions, allocating state resources, controlling media and politicizing legal and administrative structures, its hold on power came with some political costs (Levitsky and Way, 2009). This seems to be the case of the Muscovite mayor Sergei Sobyenin who, with his veto to independent candidates –and subsequent repression of protests–, lost his modernizer and pragmatic appearance.

With the uneven playing field on which the electoral competition took place the political opposition had to innovated strategies to overcome these obstructions, while taking advantage of the vulnerability of an authoritarian regime that still rely on elections for political legitimacy. Accepting the challenge in Moscow only 200 candidates attended.^{xiv} The process of collecting signatures, overcoming organizational and financial barriers, became a mobilization factor of strong basis and self-managed character. Numerous opponents were then elected in several metropolitan districts, even reaching the office of several local councils for the ending period. The latter was achieved by innovating electoral strategies, including the use of training and new technologies that attracted and informed candidates making opposition candidates more appealing to voters; developing the capacity to protect themselves against arbitrary disqualifications, organizing crowdfunding activities, and monitoring elections.^{xv} In this regard, the modernization of tactics has granted a major contestation before the power.^{xvi}

An early example of the awareness that these procedures brought about a massive response, around 20,000 citizens went out on the streets on July, 20th ^{xvii}. The public meetings with banned candidates became of days of protest on July 27th and August 3rd –each, with more than a thousand people arrested, as well as dozens of activists and candidates detained and prosecuted^{xviii}. On August 10th the biggest protest since 2012 took place, with more than 50,000 protesters. As several analysis acknowledge, the protests have catapulted the interest of Muscovites to participate in the elections, overcoming apathy as the former predominant political attitude.

The new dynamics of the mobilization, and the mass arrests as their aftermaths, required the coordination of social and legal assistance to participants and detainees. Contemplating the official information blockade, the Internet –through blogs and messaging services– became a fundamental mechanism for coordination before and during the parades, as well as for monitoring the reactions of the government and its police forces. Even though, from a sociological, political and digital media perspectives, alternative media and social

networks play an important role before the dysfunctional freedom of press and expression, they do not reinforce political power in an unique direction; they also make visible public protests being therefore useful for the government and its censorship apparatus supporting other formal and informal restrictions (Shirky, 2011; Diani, 2011; Bennet and Segerberg, 2012; Jost, Barberá, Bonneau, et.al, 2018). Authoritarian and hybrid governments have to deal with the ‘dictator’s dilemma’ when trying to restrain the Internet while the platform becomes problematic for the State increasing public access to information, promoting discussion and mobilization, (Shirky, 2011).^{xix}

Anastasia Denisova states that, even if social networks have a considerable potential in generating and maintaining political deliberation that has been excluded from the offline discourse, their translation from online discussions to offline actions remains a problematic task given the lack of affiliation with a specific political formation, the dispersed political communication, the reluctance to explore alternative information, the shaping of the political dissent by individuals and the weight of authoritarian practices that makes people suspicious and careful in their poses for political mobilization and campaigning (2019: 990-92). Even then, despite the traditional political apathy, recent polls confirm that the sympathy for the authentic independents are increasing: 37% of the respondents showed a positive attitude towards the protesters, another 27% a negative and 9% declared to value their direct participation in the protests. A social consensus emerged around two points: a) people –and not the vetoes of power– must decide on who should be nominated or rejected for local offices; b) violence and imprisonment cannot be resources to deal with the right to protest.^{xx}

Back to the politicization of legal and bureaucratic structures, the system reactions came swiftly. A strategy based on the employment, selective and / or combined of several main mechanisms, has been identified within methods such as the use of force by the police and the National Guard and the use of the courts to threaten and prosecute protesters and leaders, pressures to recruitments over young people in age of military service, threatening expulsion from universities of students participating in the protests, as well as the withdrawal of parental custody to protesting parents, among others. Therefore, even within the officialdom the repressive management of the crisis has been criticized. Alexei Kudrin, Putin's adviser and member of the regime’s liberal wing, as well as the Senator Vyacheslav Markhayev, condemned police violence administered in the events. The businessman –and former KGB agent– Sergei Chemezov, warned about the risks of a radicalization of protests as result of ignoring popular claims.^{xxi}The Human Rights Council under the Executive, requested the opening of an investigation into the excessive use of force, based on the

provisions of the Criminal Code (Article 286). In the academy various scholars have as well overcome the traditional loyalty of their administrators to the State authorities calling for union solidarity with students and colleagues repressed by the protests; they also have pointed out the need to maintain an environment of plurality and freedom in scientific and cultural venues.

Still, several investigations were held starting on July 24th in relation with the demonstrations during that month. The list of criminal charges included the alleged obstruction of the work of the electoral commission (Art. 141 of the Criminal Code), the organization of mass disturbances (Art. 212 and 318 of the Criminal Code), as well as the alleged money laundering by activists (Art. 174 of the Criminal Code). In a much-publicized instance, a criminal investigation was opened to the anti-corruption foundation headed by opposition leader Alexey Navalny for receiving funds. The executive officer of the organization was restrained for 30 day for calling “unauthorized protests” and suffered, in the course of his imprisonment, a strange attack with a toxic agent requiring hospitalization.^{xxii} Even several public companies –e.g. the Metro– and private –e.g. restaurants–started lawsuits against opposition leaders for alleged economic damages and losses resulted from the days of protest.^{xxiii}

On the central TV channels –the main source of information for the domestic population and allies of the Kremlin abroad– the broadcasters were unconditional. They condemned the actions of the demonstrators, claiming that it was an illegal provocation derived by the very intolerance of participants to reach any agreement with authorities but, in parallel, did not reporting on the excessive use of force by the latter. Consistent with the Kremlin narrative, on August 19th the State Duma interrupted its recess to discuss, in an emergency session, the alleged foreign interference in the crisis.^{xxiv} Another example, of how media communications mediated the crisis, showed that, while the police repressed the protesters in Moscow in July, the TV channels broadcasted Putin attending to a navy parade. Such postmodern exercises of ‘showing off’ a narrative of military splendor have been used by totalitarian governments such as North Korea but also by those in crisis of legitimacy such as Russia or Venezuela. Despite of political typologies –military parades have served in democracy, autocracy and authoritarianism, in France, China, USA or Brazil– in the context of Russia, military parades represent more than a patriotic ritual, but the public transcript of dominant political interests. Such displays of power represent formalized performances, prestigious activities and impressive spectacles no longer destined to popular appeal but to

teach the supreme values of the nation as a political community, also subliminally demonstrate its military force and how far its elite as commander is willing to go.^{xxv}

In Russia the social contract gradually built in two decades of Putinist Government largely kept the State out of ordinary people's economic life, basing its operations largely on a share of natural resource incomes. In doing so, the Kremlin was able to achieve either support or apathy from the majority population, allowing it to re-consolidate and centralize power over time. In general, the regime can no longer pursue with legitimacy the complicated machinery of the 'managed democracy' with its best epoch, between 2000 and 2012. During that 12-year period Putin still exercised a great deal of power and authority and decisions were made at the very top and passed down a "power vertical" moving from the federal level down to the regional and local ones. Presidential or prime-ministerial decisions were securities that had a quantifiable value in a sort of "administrative market" (Pavlovsky, 2016: 12).

In addition, from 2005 onwards, Putin's presidential administration has tried to portray itself as a champion of social rights issues. Its most prominent policy tool was the launch of a series of "national priority projects" aimed at raising standards in four key policy areas: healthcare, housing, education and agriculture (Bindman, 2015: 342). Since Putin's re-election as president in February 2012 his approach of flagging up his intentions to uphold social rights in order to appease public protests has become prominent; he has then referred to them by stating his commitment to "genuine democracy". Nevertheless, the economic environment has shifted this construct. While the situation during the last years was effective for citizenship in the sense of that "life did not improve, but it did not get worse either", in the first half of 2019 real income of Russians fell 1.3%. Moreover, antisocial policies such as the sharp rise in taxes and public services fees did not improve the environment giving free rein to manifestations for the most unexpected reasons, from economic to political ones, but also expressing civic right's defense.

After six years of gradual impoverishment and income drop of a good part of the population, Putin's support has fallen from 80% to 68%. In terms of stability, incomes and consumer prices, a 62% of those surveyed by the state pollster's evaluated the future situation of the country as unfavorable.^{xxvi} The success of Crimea affair, which internally consolidated the elite and temporarily strengthened the support of the population around Putin, does not achieve much more. Meanwhile, the system depends on its aged president, who with his visible re-election beyond 2024 recovers and in some cases exceeds the

background of the Soviet era without the effectiveness of converting instrumental advantages into political status or setting agenda within a motivated coalition or supports.^{xxvii} For all this, the current conflict is evaluated, by officialism and opposition as well, with the spectacles set on the parliamentary and presidential elections, to be celebrated in 2021 and 2024 respectively. In parallel, among Russians emerge new attitudes of criticism and demand which take distance from the official discourse. For the new generations –who have only known Putin– the threats and blackmails with a return to the “wild ninety” does not proved itself efficient.^{xxviii}

Meanwhile, the repression has increased solidarity among the protesters and within the population, generating an effect contrary to that desired by the State apparatus.^{xxix} The official expectation in Moscow, derived from the protests, increased the local voter participation of around 30%, compared to a little over 21% of the 2014 elections.^{xxx} This has led to populist measures, such as a moderate increase in pensions just days before the elections.^{xxxi} Thinking strategically for the elections to come, several banned candidates have called to endorse the vote for others accepted.^{xxxii} Also serving to consolidate the eventual victories, opposition leaders aspire to get some 300,000 votes – about 4% of the electoral register–.^{xxxiii}

From the time being, the Kremlin seems reactive to citizen action. UR, the bureaucratic machinery built for political ascent and electoral coordination does not show the discipline and cohesion of the former CPSU.^{xxxiv} While Yuri Luzhkov, mayor of Moscow between 1992 and 2010, built a particularly powerful and vertically integrated political machine, the city gradually developed a strong liberal feeling. There is also a tactic division within the elite on how to deal with the opposition challenge: whether to let them compete and demonstrate or block all their candidacies and repress their protests. Halfway between selective engagement and open repression, the authorities have given greater prominence to the closed-thinking apparatus instead of to the moderate voices such as Ella Pamfilova and Mikhail Fedotov.^{xxxv}

Despite the rivalries and contradictions between the various state agencies on how to respond to citizen demands, the Kremlin's position is still strong. Given its own nature – and the very personal political psychology of Putin and his relatives, forged in the old KGB school– the regime is not in a position to indulge. Some have concluded that the problem is simply one of autocracy, that there is no longer any distinction between the Kremlin and Putin. As Vyacheslav Volodin, a high-level domestic policy aide to Putin, has publicly said, “While Putin is there, so is Russia; once Putin is gone, so is Russia.” (Pavlovsky, 2016: 14).

Considering each civic dissatisfaction as a prelude to a regime-induced change from abroad, the Russian political elite still has administrative and repressive resources to endure further pressure ‘from below’.

The Uncertain Horizon

Election of the Moscow Duma took place on 8 September 2019. The election results showed the success of the opposition strategy: none of the United Russia candidates had more than 50 % of support -in 2014 there were 16 such candidates- and only one had more than 45 % support. Elections weren’t fair and free: the pro-Kremlin candidates received more financial and organizational resources than all their rivals combined. But, in spite of, the opposition received the largest number of seats in city council since 1993: the “smart vote” candidates collected 586286 votes altogether, while Pro-United Russia candidates collected 555063 votes. Pro-Putin candidates lost one-third of the seats following a summer of the biggest protests in nearly a decade.^{xxxvi}

The “non-system opposition” – smaller parties and movements that don’t make deals with the Kremlin, including Alexei Navalny’s group – advanced in public recognition and helped other candidates to gain political success. It shows deep cleavages inside Russian society: as politologist Kolesnikov explains, the protests in Moscow show a clash between the two middle classes: one born of the market economy and other dependent on the State.^{xxxvii} According to sociologist Denis Volkov, Moscow’s summer of protests have “left their mark on Russian society’s attitude about the government,” catapulted some new politicians – like Ilya Yashin and Lyubov Sobol– to the national stage and highlighted Russian civil society’s “ever-growing infrastructure”, that continues to learn “different tools” to protect its rights, and “civil structures” will keep developing and multiplying.^{xxxviii} And although government remains in control of the main political resources –including repressive and monetary ones– protestors did achieve a victory of sorts against government legitimacy and propaganda.^{xxxix}

In opinion of Alexander Zamyatin –an opposition local deputy– these elections have given three fundamental political results. First, was a victory of grassroots mobilization over “administrative resources”. Second, even with all the electoral and administrative resources control, United Russia is in a deep crisis, with long-term consequences. Its related to polls results: United Russia has been losing popularity according to independent Levada Center – its support stood at a mere 28 % in August^{xl} – and even in the state-owned pollster VTsIOM, that put it at 32, 6 %.^{xli} Third, considering Zamyatin, the system parties should answer to a

contradiction: respond to people's desire for a real opposition role or remain under Kremlin control and sense of the permissible. ^{xlii}

According to Stanislav Andreyev, analyst from Golos organization, the three main traits of all Russian elections were present in Moscow's local process: control over candidate registration, over the information sphere and the utilization of the dependent electorate. But there were some changes: the rallies calling for the registration of opposition candidates provoked a wide authoritarian reaction from the power, from invalidated signatures supporting nominations, dispersed street protests and arrested activists, detained opposition leaders and candidates. The repression pushed to many citizens –including academics and journalist– on the streets, against the arbitrariness of authorities. And, as a cross results of the political mobilization of protest voters – and its Smart Vote strategy – and the demobilization of conformists, the new Moscow City Duma ended up looking a little different. As Andreyev said, protests against undemocratic rules will continue to be a chronic symptom of the systemic problems in Russian politics. ^{xliii}

Last summer's protests and elections in Moscow showed the partial weakening of the Putinist governance model, at least within the geographic and social center of Russian power. The democratic opposition –from all its ideological currents and platforms– must articulate a new minimum and shared national agenda. An agenda capable of mobilizing broad popular support beyond the segment of urban, informed and relatively independent citizens of the authoritarian, paternal and clientelist State.

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ⁱ The term “electoral autocracy” comes from V-Dem (Luhmann; Maerz; Grahn; Alizada; Gastaldi; Hellmeier; Hindle & Lindberg, 2020) conceptual frame; its correlated to “competitive authoritarianism” notion, which has been coined for analysts who distinguish a civil regime where democratic institutions exist and are seen by both, government and opposition, as the main mechanism to come to power, but where the ruling party enjoys enormous advantages over the opposition in term of administration, the Executive and several forms of control, intimidation, and even repression. Other scholars classify the Russian Federation as an illiberal hybrid regime characterized by competitive multiparty elections but low civil liberties (Gilbert and Mohseni, 2011); or as a form of ‘electoral authoritarianism’ based on super-presidentialism and monopoly of power in both electoral and parliamentary politics (Gelman, 2015). See also on the subject: (Levitsky & Way, 2002).

ⁱⁱ As Gelman (2014: 37) explained “in electoral or competitive authoritarianism, and in contrast to electoral democracies, elections are marked by an uneven playing field based on: formal and informal rules that construct prohibitively high barriers to participation; sharply unequal access of competitors to financial and media resources; abuses of power by the state apparatus for the sake of maximizing incumbent votes; and multiple instances of electoral fraud. The uneven playing field serves as a defining distinction between electoral authoritarianism and electoral democracy”.

ⁱⁱⁱ See a very interesting summary of this statistics in Ben Aris & Ivan Tkachev (2019). “Long Read: 20 Years of Russia’s Economy Under Putin, in Numbers” *The Moscow Times*, 19th August, 2019.

^{iv} Nevertheless, the 2008 crisis brought the fast growth to an end and after a couple of years of post-shock turbulence the stagnation settled in from 2013 onwards and has depressed incomes ever since. Consequently, real disposable incomes have been declining since 2014, and even a shift to new methodology then didn’t help to improve reported incomes (Aris & Tkachev, 2019).

^v See Levada Centre Poll, March 5th, 2016. *Levada.ru*

^{vi} Political scientist Vladimir Gelman (2014: 69) has defined that, in post-Soviet countries “Superpresidentialism serves not only as the result of political monopolies, but also helps to create such monopolies (...) for rulers of electoral authoritarian regimes, superpresidentialism creates additional incentives to hold power at any cost”

^{vii} As Gelman explains: “Russia’s rulers invested heavily in building their political monopoly, by placing both the state apparatus and the dominant political party, United Russia (UR), under hierarchical subordination to central authority, and by effectively insulating domestic politics from direct Western influence” (Ibid).

^{viii} See also Levada Centre. (2016) “Points of disagreement in the society”. *Levada.ru*; Mareeva, S., Tikhonova, N. (2016) “Public perceptions of poverty and social inequality in Russia” *Mir Rossii*, 25(2): 37-67; VTsIOM (All-Russian Centre for the Study of Public Opinion) (2016). *Together or apart? Social contradictions in modern Russia*, November 15. *wciom.ru*.

^{ix} See Putin, V. V. “Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation” May 26th, 2004, *Kremlin.ru*; Putin, V. V. speech held on February 23rd, 2012, at Luzhniki stadium in Moscow, at a rally in opposition to the ‘For Fair Elections’ movement; ‘Putin Attacks “Jackal” Opponents’, *BBC News*, November 21st, 2007.

^x In this respect see also Auyero, J. (2004); Fernández, P. D., Martí, I., & Farchi, T. (2016) y Neveu, C. (2015).

^{xi} See “Russia: Controversial NGO Bill Becomes Law” *BBC News*, July 21st, 2012; “Council of Europe Tells Putin of Concern over Russian NGO Law.” *Reuters*. 20th May 2013. For an analytical study consult Leah

Gilbert (2016) “Crowding Out Civil Society: State Management of Social Organizations in Putin’s Russia”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68(9):1553-1578.

^{xii} See also the information published by “Golos Election Monitoring Association” available at: <https://www.golosinfo.org/>. The later has been the norm to maintain the Kremlin’s dominance. Since Putin came to power in 2000, every election had had its own rules with high scores of amendments. For instances, over the period 2003-16, the State Duma law was amended 40 times; the Law on Political Parties 36 times, and the Law on Fundamental Guarantees of Electoral Rights, 78 times (Ross, 2018: 6).

^{xiii} This procedure date from the abolishment, in 2009, of the electoral deposit making parties nominations possible only through signature collection, –though there was a period from 2012-2014 were signatures nominations were not required. According to amendments made to Federal Law, No. 67 (Article 38.24), a candidate’s nomination was rejected if they did not submit enough signatures (2-3% of the regional electorate) or if 10% of their signatures were found to be invalid (Ross, 2018: 7). The requirement to gather nomination signatures is fundamental when we consider that during its exception and reestablishment a sharp fall in the average number of party lists registered for regional assembly elections, from 17.2 in 2013 to 7.8 in 2015, 6.9 in 2016 and 7.7 in 2017 (Idem).

^{xiv} Stanovaya, Tatiana. “Moscow Protests Are Good News for Opposition—and Siloviki” *Carnegie Moscow Center*. 30 July 2019.

^{xv} It is also important to highlight the work of the mobilization monitoring group OVD-Info, founded in 2011 during the protests in the Bolotnaya. This organism counts on about 30 employees, 150 active volunteers and hundreds of applicants, supported by money contributions and donation as well as on free-willed work.

^{xvi} To see how technologies for protest coverage, mutual assistance and electoral supervision have changed the power dynamics, see Asmolov, Grigory (2019). “La suma de las tecnologías de protesta: ¿hacia dónde conduce la carrera de innovación en Rusia?” *Open Democracy*, August 15th.

^{xvii} The reality of Russian politics. July 23rd, 2019. Bulletin No. 4(32). Available at: <https://rpolitik.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/BULLETIN-No.-14-32-2019.pdf>

^{xviii} Yudin, Grigory. (2019). “A road map for the Moscow crisis” *Open Democracy*, August 12th.

^{xix} In the heat of the demonstrations Russian authorities even ordered mobile operators to cut access to mobile data services, reported Russia’s Internet Protections Society and Net Blocks internet observatory: “Evidence of internet disruptions in Russia during Moscow opposition protests”, August, 19th.

^{xx} “Треть москвичей положительно отнеслись к акциям протеста Подробнее на РБК” (2019). *Rbc.ru*, April, 06.

^{xxi} Kolesnikov, A. (2019). “Has Russia, Inc. Stalwart Chemezov Crossed the Barricades?” *Carnegie.ru*, June 26th.

^{xxii} “Russia Investigates Alleged Money Laundering by Opposition Politician Navalny” (2019). *The Moscow Times*, August, 3rd.

^{xxiii} Such monetization of the repression followed the pattern of 2012, when State companies joined the case and filed millions of claims for damages against the organizers of the protest demonstrations. “Kak монетизируют репрессии” (2019). *Vedomosti.ru*, August, 18th.

^{xxiv} State Duma Commission will address the issue of interference in the Russian internal affairs. The State Duma, the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation. <http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/46041/>

^{xxv} The functions of political rituals and military parades in particular can be consulted in: Azaryahu, Maoz. “The Independence Day military parade” *The military and militarism in Israeli society* (1999): 89-116; Paltiel, Jeremy T. (1995). “PLA Allegiance on Parade: Civil-Military Relations in Transition.” *The China Quarterly* 143: 784-800; Kandil, Hazem. *The Power Triangle: Military, Security, and Politics in Regime Change*. Oxford University Press, 2016; Henry, Marsha. (2015) “Parades, parties and pests: Contradictions of everyday life in peace keeping economies”. *Journal of Intervention and State building* 9(3): 372-390.

^{xxvi} “Most Russians Don’t Believe in a Better Future – State Poll” (2019), *The Moscow Times*, August, 20th.

^{xxvii} Gaaze, Konstantin. (2019). “As Putin’s Authority Dwindles, Protests in Russia Are Newly Effective”. *Carnegie Moscow Center*.

^{xxviii} “Putin’s pesky millennials Sociologist Olga Zeveleva explains what makes today’s protesters in Moscow something new for Russia” (2019), *Meduza*, August, 14th.

^{xxix} Greene, S (2019). “Violent Crackdowns on Russian Opposition Reveal Dangerous Policy Shift”. *The Moscow Times*, August, 1st.

^{xxx} “Moscow officials reportedly expect higher turnout in next month’s elections, thanks to ‘protest voters’.” (2019). *Meduza*, August, 19th.

^{xxxi} “Moscow Mayor Raises Pensions on Eve of Contentious City Election” (2019). *The Moscow Times*, August, 28th.

^{xxxii} “Communist running for Moscow city Duma withdraws after endorsement from barred opposition candidate”. (2019). *Meduza*, August, 23th.

^{xxxiii} “Moscow’s East-German scenario Oppositionist Leonid Volkov explains how a daring new voting strategy is supposed to destroy Russia’s political monopoly” (2019). *Meduza*, August, 16th.

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- ^{xxxiv} Trudolyubov, M. (2019). “Ask Not What the Kremlin Will Do Next More and more Russians seem to be breaking free of the old habit of trying to guess the party line”. *The Moscow Times*, August, 19.
- ^{xxxv} Aptekar, A. (2019). “Kremlin’s Violent Response to Protests in Moscow Is A Dangerous Game The authorities have moved from compromise to crackdown.” *The Moscow Times*, August, 30th.
- ^{xxxvi} “Russia’s Elections: ‘Smart Voting’ Successes, Alleged Tampering and More” (2019). *The Moscow Times*, September, 09th.
- ^{xxxvii} Kolesnikov, A. (2019). “How the Moscow Protests Reveal a Schism in Russia’s Middle Class” *Carnegie.ru*. September, 13th.
- ^{xxxviii} Volkov, D. (2019). “Российское эхо московских протестов”. *Vedomosti.ru*. September, 09th.
- ^{xxxix} Shepellin, I. (2019). “Muscovites Did Not Buy the Kremlin’s Lies, But Putin Can Rule Without Their Support”. *The Moscow Times*. September, 11th
- ^{xl} “СУММАРНЫЙ РЕЙТИНГ ПАРЛАМЕНТСКИХ ПАРТИЙ ОПУСТИЛСЯ ДО 51%” *Levada.ru*. August, 14th.
- ^{xli} ENCUESTA “VTsIOM-SATELLITE”. Available at: https://wciom.ru/news/ratings/elektoralnyj_rejting_politicheskix_partij/
- ^{xlii} Zamyatin, A. (2019). “An anatomy of defeat: what happened at the Moscow city elections” *Open Democracy*. September, 16th.
- ^{xliiii} Andreychuk, S. (2019). “Election day results in Russia: headed toward a bumpy ride”. *Riddle Editorial*, September 12th.