

Political Revival in Russia

written by Shahin Jafarli Şahin Cəfərli

A revival in Russian political life is apparent. A period of euphoria after the annexation of Crimea has come to an end, and today, Russians are more interested in their daily problems and domestic issues rather than foreign affairs. The protest mood in Russian society is strong and political activity is on the rise. The [approval ratings](#) of the ruling *United Russia Party* and President Putin have fallen to historic lows (43%).

The Moscow City Duma election will be held on September 8, along with other elections at various levels throughout the country. Moscow is inhabited by 7.2 million voters and its Duma has 45 members who are elected by majority vote for five years. Moscow has a bigger budget than all other federal subjects of Russia, which for 2019 is estimated at 2.7 trillion rubles (approximately \$40 billion). Candidates from political parties that are not represented in the Russian State Duma, as well as independents, must collect signatures from at least 3% of the voters (between 4,500 and 5,500) in a single-mandate constituency. The official candidates from the political parties that are represented in the State Duma are exempt from this requirement. The previous election for the Moscow City Duma took place six months after the annexation of Crimea and the ruling *United Russia* won 28 seats in a situation in which non-parliamentary opposition candidates and independents could not collect the required number of signatures. At that time, the low level of competition negatively affected turnout and only 20.86% of voters participated in the election.

The main difference between the current election and the one five years ago is that, on the one hand, amid growing discontent in the country, approximately 20 opposition and independent candidates (mainly from the teams of Alexei

Navalny and Dmitry Gudkov) were able to collect the required voter signatures and spark a rise in political activity, and on the other hand, the ruling party's candidates decided to run independently rather than under the brand of *United Russia*, which has lost its attractiveness. Due to the reputational fall of *United Russia*, its candidates, on the advice of the party leadership, are campaigning without revealing their political affiliation, and are even allowed to [criticize the government](#). According to a poll conducted in April this year, only [22%](#) of Muscovites are prepared to vote for *United Russia* (I will try to explain the reasons behind the ruling party's decreasing popularity). Of course, this affected the government's decision to refuse to register all the main opposition candidates on the grounds of alleged defects in the signatures they collected. It is clear that such important political decisions are made directly by the central government, not by election commissions and local administrators. If at least some of the opposition candidates had been registered, the current tension might not have flared up, and even if they all had been registered and won their elections, they would not have constituted a majority in the City Duma. In this case, the question arises: Why did the ruling party decide to keep its opponents completely out of the process?

In general, it can be explained by saying that on the eve of important political plans, it is risky for the authorities to allow opposition political forces and individuals, which can create problems for the government, to become stronger and acquire a crucial political platform and immunity. Since last year, the ruling party has been losing elections at various levels in the regions. A defeat in any election at the periphery is not a federal problem for *United Russia*; however, the political consequences of a defeat to a few opposition candidates in the Moscow City Duma election may be more severe. It is entirely possible that an opposition or independent candidate who was elected to the Moscow City Duma

from a big constituency of approximately 150,000 voters could also be elected to the Russian State Duma. The 2021 State Duma election is probably a very important step on the road to the 2024 presidential election, and the government is interested in getting through this period without a loss.

In the opposition camp, in addition to the relatively experienced Alexei Navalny, Ilya Yashin, and Dmitry Gudkov, politicians such as Lyubov Sobol, Igor Zhdanov, Konstantin Yankauskas, Vladimir Milov, Yulia Kalamina, and Yelena Rusakova are also in the spotlight. They have a small success story—they won in the the September 2017 Moscow municipal elections. Opposition candidates [won](#) 200 seats out of 1502 seats in the Moscow municipal councils. A victory in the Moscow City Duma election would enable the aforementioned activists to gain greater opportunities for oversight of budget management and transparency, to expose [corruption](#) cases and mechanisms, and to attract the attention of the urban population and the media. Their victory could also transform them into national political figures and might result in their election to the State Duma in 2021. The government does not want to allow this. Although the political parties represented in the State Duma criticize the government, they never touch President Putin, and they support his foreign policy. In the future, due to the situation in the country, the government does not want these parties to be replaced by political forces that directly target Putin and the current system.

The first option for 2024 was discussed in a previous [article](#) at Baku Research Institute: “the deeper integration within the Union State of Russia and Belarus, that is the unification of these two countries, under the leadership of Vladimir Putin as the head of this new state.” The second option is a [constitutional amendment](#): the transition to a parliamentary system and the transfer of presidential powers to the prime minister. It would be dangerous for the government to allow real opposition candidates, which can move beyond the *allowed framework for opposition* and galvanize the masses behind

themselves, to increase their political influence. The alternative, which is thought to be a remedy for the loss of the ruling party's approval ratings, is to change the electoral system. Under the current legislation, the State Duma is elected based on a mixed system—50% by proportional representation (party list) and 50% by majority vote. The government is now discussing the idea of electing [70%](#) of the legislative body based on a majority vote.

One of the challenges for the government is that traditional propagandist labels do not work in the fight against a new generation of Russian politicians such as Alexei Navalny. Political responsibility for the 1990s, which are not remembered as good times, cannot be attributed to them because at that time they were university or high school students and did not hold any public office. The demographic factor is crucial here: the generations that did not see the 1990s, or were younger at that time, have grown up; and the main thesis of the prevailing propaganda—that *“Putin raised Russia from its knees”*—is not popular among them. It is no coincidence that the core of the protests is formed by politically active representatives of these generations. They participate in unauthorized protests, even though they realize that they will be subject to police violence and arrests. In total, about 2,400 people were detained in the [July 27](#) and [August 3](#) rallies, which were organized to protest the non-admission of opposition candidates. One of the main features of these rallies was that although the organizers were detained in advance by the police, people were able to organize themselves and voice their demands. Thanks to modern information technology and social media, self-organizing protests can be observed in many parts of the world. The sanctioned rally on Sakharov Avenue in Moscow on [July 20](#) was the largest mass protest in Moscow since 2013, gathering more than 22,000 people. On August 10, a rally held at the same location gathered around [50,000](#) people, indicating that protests are on an upward trend.

Apart from the refusal to allow opposition and independent candidates to participate in the Moscow City Duma election, the current protests have another, and perhaps deeper, cause. Vladimir Putin's term in office comes to an end in 2024 and, according to the Constitution, he cannot run for president again, so a transition of power should occur. In that case, we can assume that the 2021 State Duma election is of great importance for the government, and especially for Putin, for the implementation of smooth transition of power. This assumption is based on an idea that the current government should be able to control the State Duma after the 2021 election by preserving its constitutional majority so that Putin can easily design the political future of the country. If the opposition outside the political system gained 10-15 seats in the Moscow City Duma, it would not in itself create a serious problem for the government; the main threat is the possibility that this new opposition might increase its power and destroy the long-established rules of Russian politics. The current [configuration](#) of the loyal opposition consisting of Gennady Zyuganov's *Communist*, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's *Liberal Democrat*, and Sergey Mironov's *A Just Russia* parties is comfortable for the ruling party, and the disruption of this arrangement could create some obstacles to the transition of power. For now, all this is based on assumptions, because the information we currently have is insufficient.

Repressive Measures and Societal Counter-Reactions

The government's response – persecution and arrests – to the [protests](#) in front of the Moscow City Election Commission building on July 14 demonstrated that the government did not have the political will to solve the problem and the initiative had shifted to law enforcement agencies. These agencies have not only been able to disperse unauthorized protests with special police units (*OMON*) or the National Guard of Russia (*Rosgvardia*) and arrest the leaders of the opposition, but they have also started to prosecute many of them on criminal charges. The Moscow Office of the Russian

Investigative Committee initially opened a [criminal case](#) against the July 14 rally on charges of “Obstruction of the exercise of electoral rights or the work of election commissions,” and then the case was transferred to the central agency (Investigative Committee of Russia). The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Department for Protection of the Constitutional System and the Fight against Terrorism also joined the investigation. The [FSB](#) is investigating the opposition’s relationship with foreign agencies and whether the current protests are financed from abroad.

As a result of this search, a criminal case was opened against Alexei Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation on charges of money laundering in the amount of [1 billion rubles](#). All [bank accounts](#) of the Foundation, its employees, and its headquarters in the regions were blocked. The Foundation’s Moscow office was searched for 11 hours and all computers and written documents were [confiscated](#). (The Anti-Corruption Foundation is known for its investigations of high-ranking Russian government officials. For example, its [investigation](#) about Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev has more than 31.5 million views on *YouTube*.) After the unauthorized rally on July 27, [a criminal case](#) was launched into the organization of riots, participation in them, and appeals to them. [12 people](#) have already been officially charged and arrested. It should be recalled that the same method was used against the activists of the protest movement of 2011-2013 and as part of the criminal prosecution known as the [Bolotnaya Square Case](#), 17 people were sentenced to between 2.6 and 4.5 years in prison. It is interesting that [three of the prosecutors](#) investigating the Bolotnaya Square Case are currently part of the team investigating the July 27 protests.

The disappearance of apathy and an increase in political activism and participation in Russian society have also begun to manifest themselves in the public reaction to the government’s [repressive measures](#). Russian [mainstream media](#) and celebrities (composer and musician Boris Grebeneshchikov,

actor Konstantin Khabensky, rap musician Oxxxymiron, journalist and writer Vladimir Pozner, etc.), protested the lawless arrest of journalist [Ivan Golunov](#) in early June on charges of illegal drug use. As a result, the journalist was initially released by the court and then the criminal case was dismissed; later Putin dismissed [two senior](#) Russian police officers involved in the case. Criminal charges against the July 27-August 3, 2019 rallies and subsequent arrests were also met with protest. Hundreds of writers, poets, artists, and journalists called for the dismissal of these criminal cases, which they regard as [shameful fraud](#). The administration of the Higher School of Economics, an elite university in Russia, protested the arrest of [Yegor Zhukov](#), a student and a blogger, and asked for his release. Prior to the August 10 rally, a number of [celebrities and music groups](#) with millions of followers on social media – Yury Dud, Danila Poperechny, Oxxxymiron, Face, Krovostok, and IC3PEAK – made an appeal to join the protests and also participated in the rallies.

Many did not expect that the Moscow City Duma election, which has never been a federal event in Russia and has never attracted the attention of city residents, would cause so much noise, to the extent that even Russian TV channels, which mostly focus on foreign policy and Ukraine, would have to pay attention to these local elections. Although opposition and independent candidates could not participate in the City Duma election, they were able to turn the local elections into a federal-scale issue and draw attention to the problems, such as the deficit of democracy, within the country. This is not only the most important political event in Russia in 2019, but it will also have an impact on political processes in the country in the coming years.

The Crisis of *United Russia*

Vladimir Putin's announcement at the end of 2017 that he would run for president as an independent candidate rather than as the candidate of *United Russia*, was a sign that the ruling

party was not doing well. Putin was re-elected in March 2018, but the defeat of *United Russia* in several local elections throughout the year demonstrated that the ruling party was in crisis. It was symbolic in this regard that [Anna Shchekina](#), a 28-year-old housewife from the *Liberal Democratic Party*, defeated the candidate of *United Russia* in the mayoral election in the city of Ust-Ilimsk in Irkutsk Oblast, a week after the presidential election. In November 2018, *United Russia* lost [gubernatorial elections](#) in Khabarovsk, Vladimir, and Khakassia. Communists won in [local legislative elections](#) in Khakassia, Ulyanovsk, and Irkutsk. In April 2019, *United Russia* was [defeated](#) in municipal elections in Astrakhan and Amur oblasts, and Zabaykalsky Krai. These facts are indicative of an escalation in the protest mood even in provinces far from the capital.

Not only elections, but also regular social and environmental protests in different regions confirm this. People have begun to see mass protests as the only way to solve their problems and to make their voice heard by the bureaucratic and political leadership. For example, since April 2018 there have been protests in [9 cities](#) in Moscow Oblast against the construction of a solid waste recycling plant. Residents living near the small [Shiyes](#) train station in the Lensky District of Arkhangelsk Oblast have been protesting for around a year for the same reason – the destruction of a forest area to build a solid waste recycling plant under the name *EcoTechnoPark*. In May of this year, local activists in [Yekaterinburg](#) took to the streets to raise their voice against the construction of a church in the city's central square. President Putin, who was forced to respond to the issue, proposed a survey to find out the positions of all the residents, and construction was temporarily suspended.

The Russian Economy: A Chronic Disease

During his 20-year rule, Vladimir Putin has not built a stable and diversified economy, or has not been able to. Although

quality of life rose slightly in the years of high oil prices, after 2014, the decline in oil prices negatively affected the Russian economy. In fact, even before the decline of prices in the energy market, the Russian economy was not growing at a rapid pace. For example, GDP growth was 4.5% in 2010, 4.3% in 2011, 3.3% in 2012, and just 1.8% in 2013. That is, even when oil prices reached fantastic levels (\$114-115), the pace of economic growth was declining, so it is not correct to argue that there is a perfect correlation between oil prices and social welfare in Russia. While high oil prices resulted in relative stability, they did not lead to development, and the decline in prices makes the economic situation worse. As a result of stabilization in oil prices, Russia's gold reserves are now close to [\\$520 billion](#), and in 2018, for the first time in the last seven years, the Federal Government experienced a [budget surplus](#). Nevertheless, all these did not bring any positive changes for the country and its population. On the contrary, last year's unpopular measures, such as [the pension reform](#) and the increased [value-added tax](#), indicated that the government was in need of new financial sources.

In the first quarter of 2019, compared to the same period last year, [poverty](#) in Russia increased by 0.4% to 14.3%, with 20.9 million Russians earning below the subsistence minimum. [Real incomes](#) of the population declined by 1.3% in the first half of 2019, and overall, this trend has been ongoing since 2014. According to a [poll](#) conducted in July, nearly one in four Russians (24%) said that their financial situation had worsened over the last 2-3 months, while 67% said they did not notice any change, and only 8% said they had a positive change. The decrease in incomes also affected people's diet. According to the aforementioned poll, 12% of the respondents complained that they could not meet their dietary needs. Russians' [dietary](#) intakes are now worse than they were in the 1990s, when the country was experiencing a severe economic crisis. The government is even considering various methods of adding [vitamins and proteins](#) to some of the most commonly used

products (salt and milk) in order to compensate the vitamin deficiencies that can be caused by the reduction of dietary intake. The World Bank decreased its [GDP growth forecast](#) for Russia from 1.5% to 1.2% in 2019 and the forecast for 2020-2021 is 1.8%.

These figures, which in fact mean economic stagnation, are too low for Russia as a developing country. The lack of political freedoms and judicial independence also has a negative impact on the business environment in the country. In a [survey](#) among 500 entrepreneurs, 71% of them negatively assessed the business environment in Russia. Alexei Kudrin, Chairman of the Russian Chamber of Accounts, says there is a danger of a social explosion in Russia. He called the level of poverty in the country a disgrace. "The state's share of the economy is growing, competition is shrinking, private initiative is shrinking," [Kudrin said](#). "The country did not use the chance it had for the past six years, and our share of the global economy has declined. We have not become more competitive and efficient. In that sense, we are in a state of stagnation, which gives no cause for optimism."

Fighting poverty is one of the priorities of the [decree](#) "On National Goals and Strategic Tasks of the Development of the Russian Federation for the Period until 2024" signed by Putin in May 2018. The task of the government is to reduce poverty by half, achieving sustainable growth of citizens' income, ensuring sustainable natural population growth, improving housing conditions for at least 5 million families, and making Russia one of the world's five largest economies by 2024. Is it possible to achieve these goals by directive without serious reforms? Given the current situation in Russia, it is almost impossible to answer this question in the affirmative. The need for change and reform in Russia is obvious, and any delay could have negative consequences not only for Russia, but also for the region and the world.