

The Washington Post
May 14, 2018

Putin's not as powerful as he looks



A ripped poster featuring Russian President Vladimir Putin is displayed on Europe Day, May 9, in Kosovo. (Armend Nimani/AFP/Getty Images)

by [Jackson Diehl](#)

Vladimir Putin's grim, businesslike [inauguration](#) to a fourth term as Russian president last week was accompanied by equally grim commentaries about his grip on the country. He may have stolen the election, it was said, but the vast majority of Russians support him and his regime. He may have eliminated all serious opposition, through prohibitions, imprisonment and the occasional murder, but his country is unsuited for democracy anyway.

There's a tiresome illogic to such stuff: If 80 percent of voters support you, [why not](#) let your main opponent compete, and prove it? If Russians are really content with political serfdom, why did tens of thousands of them [take to the streets](#) of [more than 60 cities](#) two days before the inauguration, [carrying signs](#) saying things such as "Putin is not our Tsar"?

How refreshing, then, to meet the group of Russians who [appeared in Washington](#) last week, shortly after Putin's swearing-in: opposition activists who are not just protesting but also organizing grass-roots movements in and around Moscow — and who delivered a small but startling rebuff to the Kremlin a few months ago. Theirs is a more realistic, grounded view of Putin's Russia, which is a place where discontent is growing, the desire for civil rights is tangible and the prospect of democratic change is, in the longer term, real.

“Yes, we believe in [Putin's] polls, but things can change very fast if there is a real opposition,” said Natalia Shavshukova, a former municipal council member who now trains local politicians. Her proof? In the municipal elections in the Moscow region [in September](#), independent candidates won 260 of about 1,500 seats, compared with 30 in the previous election. One of the districts lost by the government was the Moscow area including the Kremlin.

Wait, you say: a real democratic election? In Putin's Russia? It turns out they can still happen on the local level, largely because the regime lacks the resources to suppress independent candidates or steal votes in every municipal council. In that space, grass-roots movements have sprung up: People angry about toxic garbage dumps, a destructive urban renewal plan or local corruption are banding together, finding candidates and getting them elected, using the mostly empty shells of legally tolerated political parties as their vehicles.

“We have already proved that opposition candidates are able to win at the local level. That's because the authorities didn't think we were dangerous,” said Vladislav Naganov, a 30-something lawyer who was elected to the Khimki district council outside Moscow. Added Julia Galiamina, of the Timiryazevsky district council: “Our behavior changed the system. When we work on the ground and lead a good team, we win.”

If opposition leaders do start to look dangerous, of course, bad things happen to them. Yevgeny Urlashov, a charismatic opposition leader who in 2012 won election as mayor of Yaroslavl, a city of 600,000, is now [serving a 12-year prison sentence](#) on trumped-up charges. Boris Nemtsov, a national opposition leader, was [murdered](#) on a bridge outside the Kremlin in 2015. Alexei Navalny, who succeeded him as Putin's chief nemesis, has been banned from elections and subjected to constant harassment since receiving [27 percent](#) of the vote in a 2013 contest for mayor of Moscow.

What the emerging local movements show, though, is that if Putin is seeking to create a model of 21st-century authoritarian government in Russia, he's not succeeding. His regime consists of a centralized, mafia-like clique that controls the military, security services, state television and a number of big companies but — unlike in the Soviet era — not everything. Wherever it retreats — and under mounting economic pressure, the regime is retreating — an independent civil society springs up. That's especially true among younger people, who make up a large share of the opposition candidates in local elections.

Though they don't get much attention, popular protests are slowly growing around Russia. They are triggered by the abuses and disasters of a failing government — such as the [shopping-mall fire that killed 64 people](#) in the Siberian city of Kemerovo in March, or [the landfill emitting toxic fumes](#) in the Moscow suburb of Volokolamsk last month.

Shavshukova said that for many of those turning out for demonstrations, “it’s not a political project. But was the Boston Tea Party a political project? Nobody knows when it starts to turn into politics.”

It may take a long time. But what seems clear in talking to these Russian organizers is that Putin, the putative all-powerful ruler, will not control the timing. “For many people, Putin is simply a symbol of great Russia,” said Galiamina. “Our goal is to show people the connection between local problems, their lives and federal policies. But it’s a very long-term goal. For now, we have to show them that politics exists.”

Jackson Diehl is deputy editorial page editor of The Post. He is an editorial writer specializing in foreign affairs and writes a biweekly column that appears on Mondays.

Copyright 2018 The Washington Post