GREEN
EUROPEAN
JOURNAL

Russian Elections: Apathy Prevails

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March 14, 2024

The West has become used to the Kremlin's pronouncements that all of Russia hopes for victory in Ukraine. While open opposition to this view remains marginal, most people find themselves on uneasy middle ground. For many, holding on to what they have right now is the most important thing, and this will matter when they cast their votes.

It has been a harsher winter than usual. Swathes of Russia were hit by snowstorms and polar ice winds early this year. Everybody was digging their cars out of the snow in temperatures of up to minus 40 degrees. Luckily it was the holiday week and delivery delays had minimal effect. People were either at their dachas or making a point of doing precious little at home.

On 9 January, our suburban micro-district in Yekaterinburg was all over the local news and social media. Local authorities waited until the first working day of the year to clear the roads. One of the main roads into the city passes through here and it resulted in hours-long traffic with hundreds late for work. Suburban electric trains also broke down due to the weather.

Public transport is minimal this way; two buses go to the centre. A tramline is under construction and its opening is severely delayed. The metro is quite modest and the *electrichka* lines need finishing too. Since cars are a necessity, how could the local authorities mess up? And why was no answer given?

As people seethed in the traffic, billboards along all of the major roads into Yekaterinburg, Russia's fourth-largest city, were advertising an upcoming event: the 2024 presidential election.

Election ads had been up for a while when Orthodox Christmas arrived – even though the campaign had not officially begun. They were more numerous than any other, including those about military recruitment. Putin's campaign was publicly visible for the first time here on 8 January. I did not notice it when I first walked into a local shopping mall – *Raduga* (the Russian word for rainbow). But on the way out, a tiny stall at the exit caught my eye. It had only the tricolour flag with the words "Russia, Putin, 2024" in each band. As for the male and female operating it? University students – not Putin's typical base, especially in Yekaterinburg, a renowned liberal bastion.

They handed out flyers to people exiting the mall (not as they entered). No enthusiasm was visible. This election is not persuasion-based and people were not at the mall to talk politics. It is not just publicly risky; people wanted to shop, eat, go to the cinema, ice skate and then go straight home to keep out of the freezing cold. Like most flyers, these went straight into the bins outside. The bins were briefly moved to stop that.

8 January was the same day that millions more signatures arrived to get Putin on the ballot. Only the Liberal Democratic (LDPR) candidate Leonid Slutsky and New People's Vladislav Davankov had been approved to run at this point. Both began campaigning quietly in December, but there was little fanfare or reporting on their campaign stops. For one thing, Putin was all over TV most of the winter anyway. Any mentions of other candidates were drowned out by clips of Putin travelling throughout Russia, fixing the

people's problems and celebrating Christmas with veterans' families. Moreover, most people did not care; it was the holidays and their cars were trapped by the weather.

The Communist Party's candidate, Nikolai Kharitonov, got on the ballot whilst half of Yekaterinburg sat in traffic. Few cared. He has been somewhat quiet since, except on the anniversary of Lenin's death, and some party members were not happy with his candidacy. Younger party members are not diehard Marxists, and instead tend to hail from the party's social-democratic wing. They ache for genuine socio-economic reforms and real political debate. Communist voters normally turn out in strong numbers, but that is in danger for more reasons than one.

Enter the centre-right opposition party Civic Initiative and its leader, Boris Nadezhdin. At the end of the first working week, Nadezhdin called the special military operation "a big mistake" to a group of soldiers' wives. While technically a crime, it was unclear how far he could push that line going forward. But two weeks later, huge queues formed in Yekaterinburg; people were rushing to give him their signatures. The late Alexei Navalny, exiled former oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, and several other opposition figures endorsed Nadezhdin. He was, it seems, the only one running as a principled critic of Putin and campaigning for peace.

But just as the supposed saviour emerged, he vanished. Nadezhdin has held several positions since the 1990s, including Duma deputy and aide to Boris Nemtsov and former Prime Minister Sergei Kiriyenko. But many of Russia's "purest" liberals initially worried he was a designated spoiler. Civic Initiative is a Kremlin-created party. Nadezhdin has been a liberal whipping boy on state TV numerous times. Yet, for a brief moment, he was the best legal way to defeat Putin. Barring him from running perfectly underscores why so many are apathetic: why can people not have a genuine and proper discussion about Russia's present problems and future hopes? If everything is predetermined, like under communism, what is the point?

A daughter of Yekaterinburg also cleared the first hurdle to run as an independent in December. Cosmetics blogger Rada Russkikh got 500 people into a meeting to support her candidacy, before signature hunting. To say there was confusion about her candidacy would be an understatement. A self-professed plastic surgery addict (she has had 16 operations in total), her message appeared to be quasi-economic. She claimed that Russia no longer produces anything (false), that it can no longer hide behind "Russian literature, Gagarin and past wars" (correct), and encouraged people to be more eco-friendly in their product choice and water usage. The Kremlin is clearly unbothered by Russkikh and several other candidates likely to appear on the ballot.

Look at the fault lines between Russkikh, Nadezhdin, Putin's campaign stall at *Raduga*, and our district on the morning of 9 January, and the mood ahead of the election is clear: people are fed up. Big questions surround administrative competence, growing poverty and corruption. The issues closest to home are coming to the forefront of Russian politics. But this election is not about any of that.

Putin will probably win by a landslide and the opposition will be further from power than ever. However, public discontent is rising, and it was long before the invasion. The Kremlin has not been able to reverse this trend by silencing dissenting voices. Civil society is coping and resisting quietly in unusual ways.

Still something to lose

Since 2011, Russia has seen a general decline in living standards. Pensions and salaries have not caught up with inflation – currently at 7.5 per cent – and public investment is lacking. The opaque

decision-making process is naturally disillusioning. But a generational shift is underway as Russia becomes more removed from socialism. This generation, with few to no memories of the last century, has started demanding more effective and accountable governance. It is less reliant on the state for financial assistance or its information, and it is now having an impact on public discourse. Public pressure forced the state to change policies on pensions and vaccine mandates, and secure the release of journalist Ivan Golunov. The ruling party even lost key elections in several regions before the 2020s.

The Kremlin has been hard-pressed to find and champion any recent policy successes that have actually improved people's everyday lives. That is not to say there are none. Much to the displeasure of Putin's opponents, Russians live longer, healthier lives today than ever before. Even with the sanctions, Russia is more westernised than at any point in the last 100 years. The Putin years have afforded millions the opportunity to get richer, live in safety, and pursue personal happiness.

But times change and perception is everything in politics. The intense focus on patriotic history education is not helping cities deal with overpopulation and stretched infrastructures. Most regions are still running deficits and relying on Moscow for financial support. Around two-fifths of the population spend half their income on basic goods. Birth rates have been going down for years and life expectancy is dipping. Pensions are lower in Russia than in Belarus and China. The price of a small flat is up 60 per cent since 2022 and mortgages are practically unattainable.

Small towns and the countryside are not just depopulating, their infrastructure is quite literally crumbling. The harsh winter caused water pipes to break in several regions. Thousands in the Kaliningrad, Yaroslavl, Leningrad, Ryazan, Chelyabinsk, Novosibirsk and Voronezh regions had no heating for days in temperatures of up to minus 30. The general wear and tear of pipes built in the 1960s and 1980s finally caved. An estimated 44 per cent of utility infrastructure is past its sell-by date. The State Duma reckons 80 per cent need repairs and Rosstat, the federal statistics service, says three per cent are in an emergency state.

It would cost an estimated 22 trillion rubles to fix these problems and the Kremlin cannot find that overnight. Regional governments simply do not have the budgets or fiscal space to find money for repairs and upgrades (it was cut to help fund the war). But that is not even the worst part. Service costs are up 14 per cent, meaning people are paying more for services that have not improved.

The economy is also overheating due to the war and sanctions. Prices and interest rates have skyrocketed. Goods are up 40 per cent and the Central Bank Russia's interest rate was at 16 per cent in December 2023. It looks set to remain in double figures this year as companies are borrowing more and asking for state subsidies en masse.

For now and for most, any personal hatred of Putin or the war is not worth more than their own safety and comforts.

Of course, Putin does not personally control egg prices, the quality of water pipes, or when the snowplows clear the roads, but the Kremlin is in a tricky spot ahead of the election. People have a lot more to complain about nowadays. There is also evidence from the Levada polling agency that the population is becoming war-weary and wants to start negotiations. Not everybody watches *First Channel* or consumes state propaganda, but everyone goes shopping, studies, works, and wants a warm home.

The public expects action and the Kremlin cannot simply keep kicking the can down the road forevermore. That was the real problem with Nadezhdin; his support seemed genuine, not forced, and people do want better quality services and peaceful lives.

The next problem is precisely that issues closer to home are becoming the focal point of resistance and discontent. National issues get little attention in everyday life, and this is helped by the fact that local news outlets are generally much freer and more widely read. They are actually talking about local problems. We saw this in Bashkortostan, southwest of Yekaterinburg, on 15 January. Braving the freezing cold, 5,000 protestors demanded the release of local activist Fail Alysnov and the governor's resignation. Accused of inciting racial hatred against migrant workers at a rally last April (allegations he denies), Alysnov successfully rallied against the state in 2020 to halt a limestone mining operation on a sacred hill called Kushtau. A court ruling scheduled for that day was postponed, and his eventual conviction brought 10,000 protestors out onto the streets of Ufa, the regional capital.

It was a reminder of how everyday corruption, a lack of accountability, and ignoring people's everyday struggles has its limits. When the pipes burst or sacred land is in danger, attacking the LGBTQ+ community and discussing abortion bans does not distract most. Arresting celebrities at a naked party does not bring egg prices down. After all, moving the bins meant more litter.

To control the narrative, Putin's surrogates quickly point to a growing economy of 3.5 per cent in 2023 – well above the UK's but below the US at 5.2 per cent. Sanctions have not inflicted the pain intended in the sense that Russia has not become isolated, and their measurable impact on people's everyday lives is low. Most Russians were not used to foreign holidays or savings anyway. Brands have found their way back into shops through different supply lines. The Kremlin can also blame certain figures within the establishment, like governors, ministers and mayors ("good tsar, bad boyars"). Putin has fired and arrested several this year already for the damaged water pipes and egg hoarding. Egg prices are also coming down.

Putin had no choice but to directly intervene on the cost of eggs. Bread prices were the catalyst of the revolution in 1917, which brought down the Romanov dynasty. The food shortages of *perestroika* also contributed to the USSR's unravelling. If enough people are unable to buy food, are forced out of their homes into the cold and cannot get to work, then mass protests become more likely. After the state clamped down on anti-war protests in 2022, people ultimately fell in line (or fled). The reason was quite simple: people still had a lot to lose. They will be much harder to silence when they do not have anything. For now and for most, at least, any personal hatred of Putin or the war is not worth more than their own safety and comforts.

"A fragile peace"

For the time being, society is finding quiet refuge from the present in the places it can. Friends and neighbours have long stopped reading news about the war and politics. Many have switched to getting their information entirely from YouTube, Telegram or local news outlets. This trend began years ago, but it has allowed the likes of TV host Kseniya Sobchak and Rada Russkikh to run for president. They are more familiar to the average person than the dinosaurs of Russia's systemic opposition and represent a modern, stylish life that the young crave. When one walks around Russia's cities, the bars, cafes, restaurants, theatres and shops are all full and lively. People are dressed up and having fun, not reminiscing about a mythical past. The war has helped Russians live in the here and now – even with its problems.

This will matter when they cast their votes. Despite the war, life for most remains somewhat normal and relatively comfortable. It is a fragile peace that rocking the boat could disrupt. People who wished to vote for Nadezhdin would have done so in a cautiously optimistic manner. Millions will vote despite the guaranteed outcome. Some tell me they do not want their votes stolen. State employees have received emails reminding them of their duty to vote. Some groups will be paid off.

Yet, what must not be forgotten is that Putin's legitimacy has always relied on an element of popular support. Despite widespread dissatisfaction with the present, Putin's popularity still remains high, particularly among older voters, as well as one-company towns and villages with a more "traditional" lifestyle and values. Around half of young people also have a favourable opinion of Putin. An increase in propaganda is not irrelevant in that regard. There is also very little evidence that a majority blame Putin personally for Russia's ills. Rather, the Putin years have offered them more stability, security, and relative prosperity.

Russia still has not fully answered fundamental questions of identity, meaning its governing structures lack a clear sense of future direction.

For a little more perspective, inflation was at 82 per cent after the 1998 default. Pensions and savings were completely lost then. Despite Russia's very real problems today, it is a long way from people selling their possessions to buy food. Yet, those memories still resonate and are hard to overcome. Nadezhdin might be the only hope for Russia's opposition, but he was also part of the 1990s political class responsible for the shock therapy that caused misery for millions. Fear of the alternative or going back to the 1990s will be employed as a campaign message.

Alternatives are lacking for the anti-Putin voters as well. If not Nadezhdin, who? The others poll around three per cent at best and look unlikely to rock the boat. Despite opposing some of Putin's domestic agenda, Kharitonov promised not to criticise him. Davankov is a spoiler candidate, though he is relatively unknown and gave Nadezhdin his signature. Russkikh's candidacy is not taken seriously anywhere and she also admits to not actually wanting the job. Too much vote splitting among the candidates will backfire. Equally, voter apathy will benefit Putin.

Live for today

Russia does not look like a democracy, but it also does not look like a totalitarian state – under Stalin, Nadezhdin would have been shot. As I walk through my building's courtyard where people walk their dogs, the neighbours' children play and people have small talk; it does not feel any different than five years ago. Those enjoying the nightlife do not look oppressed. It does not feel like a country at war, either. But this is a fragile peace underscored by fears of another mobilisation, loss, and economic hardship. The bars are full because maybe tomorrow it will not be possible. With the war ongoing, it is unclear if the money to fix the pipes will arrive. If Russia loses, many fear the consequences of a humiliated, revanchist, and staunchly nationalist state out for revenge.

Had Putin stepped down in 2018 or this year, Russia would have undergone fundamental changes from the top down. A younger generation of politicians with fresh ideas would have had the freedom to tackle pressing issues, and loosen the state's monopoly. However, this preoccupation with the glorious past holds it back. Russia still has not fully answered fundamental questions of identity, meaning its

governing structures lack a clear sense of future direction.

It is unclear how long Putin will remain Russia's leader. If history is anything to go by, he will, in all likelihood, either die in office or step down only due to ill health. If neither of those happens, Putin will only be defeated by economic hardship. Western sanctions will not bring that about. And to be clear, Russia's economy is far from collapsing. But the Kremlin has work to do in pleasing an unhappy population.

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Published March 14, 2024
Article in English
Published in the *Green European Journal*
Downloaded from https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/russian-elections-apathy-prevails/