

## EVENT REPORT

### BÖLL Lunch debates

#### Reconnecting Europe III

#### Beyond the 2018 Presidential Election: Is Russia Preparing for Life after Putin?<sup>1</sup>

*On 18 March, the Russians went to the ballot boxes to elect a new president. There was not the slightest doubt about Putin's re-election. After the elimination of the only real oppositional candidate Alexei Navalny, none of the (often controversial) oppositional candidates could be considered strong enough to compete; neither was the opposition able to convince enough people to boycott the election in order to, at least, discredit Putin's victory. In the military half of his pre-election state of the nation address, Putin praised (and demonstrated) new Russian weaponry, including nuclear-powered cruise missiles, trying to show to his own people that he still is the strongman Russia needs in difficult times and at the same time pointing out to the West, especially the US, that Russia will not be curbed in its foreign policy ambitions and wants to be taken seriously. But whilst Putin is settling in for another six years, the question emerges what will happen in 2024? By then Putin will be 72 years old. And even if age shouldn't bring Putin to step down, the Russian constitution does not allow the president to serve more than two consecutive terms. Putin got around this once, when he changed place with Medvedev, but can or will he do it again? Or will he, what is often suggested, handpick his successor? And what will happen in between and after? Can Putin deliver the change a majority of Russians long for after years of economic depression and a diminishing quality of life? Are the Russian elites concerned about their future and will there be new chances for civil society and political opposition? Will Russia's youth rise again after the clampdown in 2011-2012? In short, is Russian society preparing for life after Putin?*

#### **Putin and the presidential election: how to organise a plebiscite for oneself**

During the 2018 Russian presidential election, the most important phase was not the vote itself or even the campaign, but the selection and registration of the candidates. Putin's main opponent, Alexei Navalny, saw his candidacy blocked because of a conviction for misuse of funds (which was later annulled by the ECHR). The result was anything but surprising; Vladimir Putin was re-elected by 77% of the polls with a 67% turnout rate (which is very high for Russia). Even though significant irregularities in many polling stations were reported, nothing could spoil Putin's triumph. The Kremlin even could afford the luxury to have an opponent – Ksenia Sobchak – openly criticising Vladimir Putin, but it needs to be said that Putin is almost like family to her. Her father, the first democratically elected mayor of Saint Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak, was an influential politician of the Gorbachev era who supported Putin in the beginning. Nonetheless she was the only candidate to oppose the annexation of Crimea, which together with her liberal ideas, such as LGBT rights, made her completely unacceptable for the vast majority of Russians (gathering around 2, 5% of the polls together with the other liberal candidate – Yavlinsky). She seemed to conscientiously narrow her electoral basis during the campaign in order to stay on good terms

---

<sup>1</sup> The event took place on the 21 March 2018; The panelists were: **Nikolay Petrov**, Professor and Head of the Laboratory of Methodology of Regional Development Evaluation at the Higher School of Economics, Moscow; **Tamás Meszerics**, Member of the European Parliament (Greens/EFA); **Tania Marocchi**, Policy Analyst, European Policy Centre (EPC) Europe. The debate was moderated by **Johannes Voswinkel**, Director Moscow Office Heinrich-Böll- Stiftung.

with the Kremlin. She pretended to take over Navalny's role by claiming to be the 'anti-system' candidate and promising to step back in case Navalny would be released and allowed to run for presidency. In contrast to Sobchak, Navalny did have a programme matching the needs and aspirations of the Russian people such as combating corruption or improving the living standards.

The most reliable indicator to measure Putin's popularity – or to create it – was a high turn-out rate, so that this poll could become a message to the Russians and to the world. It was clear that the result of this election had to be better than in 2012 in order to simulate a massive endorsement of the population. Elections are also an exercise for Putin's regime to reveal who, among the Russian elites, is loyal to Putin. Knowing that many regional officials are jailed for random reasons each year, it is important for them to mobilise the voters and show their loyalty.

The results show the strength of Putin as a leader; controlling and protecting his country. The official rhetoric changed few years ago, shifting away from the willingness to cooperate with the West to the idea of being under siege. In the last decades, Russia had lost a big part of its historic area of influence in Central Europe, mostly through the 2004 enlargement and association agreements in Eastern Europe and in the Caucasus. The shock came in 2014 when Ukraine was about to sign an Association Agreement with the EU, and finally stepped back under pressure from Russia; which had to react to retain one of its last satellite state. This event triggered the Maydan revolution and then the separatist wars in Eastern Ukraine. Being aware of this, Putin's external actions are mostly about restoring the idea of Russian grandeur both internally and externally. In this regard what he did with Crimea is historical for many Russians.

But there are still some pockets of resistance to the regime within Russia: Civil society organisations are very active, but in a less political way than in the EU, mostly through charity work and social entrepreneurship. It is their only way to secure funding because the Russian government doesn't subsidise civil society organisations anymore and it is very difficult to receive funds from abroad. NGOs funded from abroad are classified as 'foreign agent' and have to comply with the 2012 Russian Foreign Agent Law. Russian civil society organisations have, for historical reasons, the best record with underground survival during repression times. Activism still exists; oppositional opinions are tolerated, but only as long as they are not heard by a large number of people.

### **Is Putin punching above his weight?**

Putin wants to impose himself as a key player in international politics, but Russia might not have strong enough shoulders to keep up with such ambition. For a country with the GDP of Italy (but 2,5 times more populated) and economically dependent on oil and gas (70% of its exports and 15% of its GDP); Putin with his playing tough in Ukraine, Syria and even Europe (the Skripal Case, meddling in the Brexit and Catalan referenda, French and German elections...) might be punching above his weight. Last year, in 2017 the economy stabilised and incomes increased for the first time in years. The regime will have to get on with the task of reducing inequalities and corruption, and seriously diversify the economy.

Russia, with a high death and low birth rate, is also facing a demographic problem. The population decreased with four percent since the 1990's, yet Putin managed to reverse this trend during the last years by launching social programmes to boost the fertility rate (now at 1,7 children/woman, which is above the EU average). Demography plays a key role in the Kremlin's strategy, because it is impossible for Russia to assert itself as a global superpower while its population is ageing and decreasing. However, Russia is definitely a strong regional (and nuclear) power, actively securing its neighbourhood in Donbas, Syria and Ukraine. Putin also wants to persuade the world that Russian strategic interests are shifting from the West to Asia, but so far Sino-Russian

relations are not so friendly and Russia still cannot afford to bypass financial connections with the United-States.

The future of Russia lies in its youth. Even if the current young generation is not numerous, the Kremlin took last year's demonstrations in support of Navalny very seriously. The repression was harsh in the big cities, where Navalny's supporters are located. Those demonstrations failed because other segments of the population did not support them. Elsewhere the rest of the youth is largely pro-Putin thanks to the revival of the Orthodox Church, massively supporting the Kremlin's policies. Given the current situation characterised by repression and shrinkage of space for civil society, the last resort for young opponents is to leave and live abroad either in Kiev or – for the wealthier among them – in London for.