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## Russia

# Politics begins at home

MOSCOW

A new political landscape is emerging: local, energetic and mistrustful

ONE month after Vladimir Putin was again elected Russian president, Moscow betrays few signs of drama. The protests that erupted in December have become sporadic, and the troops that were hauled in on election night are back in their barracks. The Kremlin has regained its composure without resorting to violence (as some had feared) or giving much political ground (as some had hoped). A month before Mr Putin's inauguration, his policies and the shape of his government remain unclear. But the implied message is that everything will carry on as before, bar a few tweaks here and there.

Yet that impression is deceptive. Although the protests are ebbing, the undercurrents that triggered the discontent are eroding the foundations of the Kremlin's political system. A poll by the Levada Centre found that only 17% of Russians want Mr Putin to be president in six years' time. More than 40% are looking for a fresh face.

Discontent has spread beyond the middle classes and the big cities, according to Mikhail Dmitriev, head of the Centre for Strategic Research, a think-tank, who foresaw the winter protests and is now conducting a study of non-middle-class Russians. His findings are yet to be published, but it is already clear that Mr Putin's supporters are losing motivation as his opponents grow in determination.

The broad unhappiness, says Mr Dmitriev, may not take the form of open protest,

but it has already manifested itself in various regional elections. On April 1st an opposition candidate in Yaroslavl, an ancient city north-east of Moscow, won a landslide victory in a mayoral election against a Kremlin nominee. There was a similar result in Togliatti, a town in south-western Russia best known for making Lada cars. Such votes are starting to look like a trend, and as such carry a message to regional elites: being in opposition may now be a better idea than being an ally of the system. Equally important, say Russian analysts, was the involvement of journalists and Moscow-based election observers who ensured a genuinely fair poll in Yaroslavl. Real politics is spreading to the regional and municipal level.

Russians across the country want to elect their own governors. In Moscow protest has become more localised. A recent gathering next to Red Square, which resulted in the arrest of 85 activists, was an attempt to claw back city space taken over by the Kremlin. Protesters vowed to return and may soon start demanding an early mayoral election in the capital.

The regionalisation of politics in Russia is not just a sign of grass-roots activism, says Mr Dmitriev, but a symptom of people's lack of trust in politicians and parties at the federal level. People are looking not for politicians boasting promises and programmes, "but for local administrators capable of solving local problems. Top of the

list are health care, education and roads.

One result of this mistrust is that it impedes the creation of national political parties. That is a problem for Russian liberals, who, unlike the Communists, lack organisation or unifying leaders. A new law simplifying the registration of parties will make this weakness only more apparent. It may explain why shrewd opposition politicians, including Alexei Kudrin, a former finance minister, and Alexei Navalny, a popular blogger, have chosen to work through civil-society initiatives rather than to form parties.

Mr Dmitriev says he also detects a deep suspicion of foreign powers, particularly America, that borders on xenophobia. This sefitiment is largely the result of Kremlin propaganda, which over the past decade has cultivated the image of Russia as a fortress besieged by foreign enemies, and installed a cynical view that everybody is motivated by greed.

### Of television and God

Take "Anatomy of a Protest", a pseudo-documentary screened last month by NTV, a state-controlled television channel. Like Soviet-era propaganda, the film rubbished protest leaders' talk of "dignity" and insinuated that they were in the pay of foreign governments. It seemed to recall the advice of Peter Verkhovensky, the chief provocateur in Dostoyevsky's novel "Devils", who explains that "the best way to win over a Russian is by openly advocating a right to be dishonourable."

Aired twice in one week, NTV's film provoked protest from liberal Muscovites, turning them against anyone working for or advertising on the channel. "It was also meant", says one of NTV's more liberal-minded journalists, "as a deliberate humiliation to those of us who sympathised with the protests and tried to report them ••

• objectively." No journalist quit the channel, partly because of a lack of other work, and partly because of small new media freedoms granted by the Kremlin. But although state television can still transmit the Kremlin's message, its effectiveness is waning. When pollsters asked Russians about the protesters' motivation, twice as many cited dissatisfaction as money.

Well aware of the mistrust in state institutions, the Kremlin has attempted to draw on the support of the Orthodox church;

the patriarch in effect campaigned for Mr Putin's election. When Pussy Riot, a group of young feminist punks decked out in balaclavas and fluorescent stockings, danced and sang "Virgin Mary, Redeem us of Putin!" by the altar of Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, church and state responded as one. As the head of the church thundered about blasphemy, the state arrested three of the women. They face up to seven years in jail if convicted of the trumped-up charges they face. The harsh

approach has led to a split within the church and set liberal Russians against the patriarch. (His moral credentials have been further undermined by news of a lawsuit involving his private flat and photos of a \$30,000 watch on his wrist.)

Andrei Zorin, a cultural historian, says the NTV film and the treatment of Pussy Riot suggest that the Kremlin is betting on cynicism and hatred. But the tactic is risky: in a crisis, both sentiments could easily be turned against the Kremlin, as well as the church. A slide into left-leaning populism is one danger.

The only way to prevent radicalisation and ensure a transition of Russia's system into something more stable, Mr Dmitriev argues, is through the slow work of rebuilding trust and institutions. Success is far from certain, and time is short. But what other choice is there? •