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**RUSSIA'S INTERNAL COMMUNICATION MODE IN THE
CONTEXT OF THE 2018 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS**

Bachelor's Thesis

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I declare I have written the bachelor's thesis independently.

All works and major viewpoints of the other authors, data from other sources of literature and elsewhere used for writing this paper have been referenced.

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ABSTRACT

Arguably, since 2000, the system of governance in the Russian Federation is *de facto* managed by the current president Vladimir Putin. After almost two decades of the relatively passive acceptance of the Putin's political regime, the country's civil society has managed to enhance its role in the state and made significant changes to the stagnating internal communication mode by bringing protest movement to a new level.

This research examines Russia's intra-societal communication, contextualising the observation with the following two major moderators: a) the upcoming presidential election scheduled for 2018, and b) the evident factor of discontent that the Russian Federation faces in the process of developing interactions with the outer world due to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

The paper aims at becoming a modest contribution to a broad multidisciplinary debate on ethics and intra-society engagement, using the latest period of Russia's turbulent history.

Key words: Russian presidential election in 2018, Vladimir Putin, internal communication mode, internal and external context, opposition, popular protest movement, civil society.

INTRODUCTION

In his current capacity, Vladimir Putin, the president of the Russian Federation, has been leading his country since May 2000. The ‘pause’ of 2008-2012, when Putin stepped down in ranks to become prime-minister in what appeared to be a ‘technological’ move to extend his period of ruling as the president for yet another two ‘rounds’, needs to be kept in mind, too. In accordance to the norms of the Russian Constitution, which now contains the 2012 amendment regarding the duration of presidential term, Putin has a chance to continue as head of state for another six years, should he get the March 2018 presidential election won. If it occurs, by 2024, at the age of 72, he will have effectively run Russia for slightly less than a quarter of a century.

It has been argued that the modern Russian state is ‘reincarnating’ the time known in historiography and political science as the ‘era of stagnation’ (or ‘застой’ in Russian), the Soviet period lasted from the beginning of 1970s until 1985; therefore, in the non-official media as well as in academic research Putin is often compared to Leonid Brezhnev who led the Soviet Union for 18 years (Taylor 2017; Romanov 2014; Kuchins 2014). At the same time, the vast majority of modern academic works on Russia, while discussing the state of the Russian economy as well as politics, is yet to initiate a discussion that can interlink **communication-related factors**, the **Russian civil society-originated actions**, and the country’s **contemporary foreign policy-making mechanism** under one single observational ‘umbrella’. Partially, it happens because international scholarship does not receive much analytical ‘help’ from Russia itself – as noted by Kashkin (2014, 89), “communication studies in Russia do not exist” as a sub-discipline. In addition, the Russian ‘theme’ in the field of international relations is overwhelmingly framed by discussions on geo-politics where different realist schools of thought are dominating for years (see, for example, Mearsheimer, 2014). Finally, a certain degree of obvious predictability in regards of the March 2018 presidential election’s outcome can erroneously lead an academic enquiry to a simplified conclusion on Russia as a place where perceptions and communication mode do not get changed easily (O’Loughlin and Talbot 2005).

Addressing the above mentioned shortcomings and attempting to become an empirical ‘value-adding’ component of a multidisciplinary discussion on ethics and social engagement (see Schneider and Hanemaayer 2014), this paper expresses an initiative for international academia to recognise the fact that, contrary to the two decades of the relatively passive acceptance of the Putin’s political regime, Russia’s civil society has **evidently** got through it to enhance its role in the state and make significant changes to the stagnating intra-oriented communication mode. Gradually, since 2004-2005, the number of people dissatisfied with the today’s political regime in Russia has increased, and this tendency can be proven by a growing number of mass protests in the country.

In the context of this paper’s main argument, it is worthwhile noting that all of those changes are **substantially moderated** by the following two major factors: a) the upcoming presidential election scheduled for March 2018; b) the Russian Federation’s multi-dimensional conflict with Ukraine, due to the illegal military intervention in the Crimean peninsula in 2014 and the *de facto* occupation of the Ukrainian Donbass’ sizable part.

Therefore, this research work opts to examine Russia’s intra-societal communication mode, contextualising its observation with the 2018 presidential election (in spite of its perceivably predictable outcome) and the country’s direct involvement in Ukraine that made Russia’s international image to be far more negative than positive (Marxsen 2014).

In order to conduct a comprehensive observation on the topic, this paper will be attempting to answer the following set of research questions: a) which intra-state events are indicating the change of communication mode within the Russian society and also between the Russian civil society and the official Kremlin? b) given the Western response to Moscow’s actions in Ukraine (Dreger et al. 2014), what is the current *status quo* on Russia’s position in the international system and how it is affecting the country’s intra-societal communication?

On the methodological side, this research work, acknowledging its descriptive nature (in order to collect as much fresh empirical evidence as possible), is adopting a holistic qualitative approach for tackling the declared argument. In the first chapter, the paper extensively employs historiographical method, statistical data analysis and process-tracing. The second part is featured by discourse/content analysis and statistical analysis as well. The paper’s discussion is

based on using both primary and secondary sources, with the latter been overpoweringly represented by Russian media sources, blogs and *YouTube* channels.

1. INTERNAL SITUATION

1.1 The push for change

The current stage of the social movement began in 2005, when the reform on monetisation of benefits, adopted by the government, raised mass protests in the country – a new legislation provided for the replacement of fringe benefits by monthly monetary payment ('Monetizatsia l'got v Rossii'... 2014). The monetisation reform was supposed to improve the Russian budget system and to provide some cash for development of transport infrastructure, housing and public utilities and other sectors of the Russian economy. Senior citizens, who had been affected by the reform, became the main driving force of a protest movement that eventually pushed for a more comprehensive internal communicational shift driven by dissatisfaction. Due to these initial protests, new social movements and political activist projects began developing, and this factor brought about change that started shaping the internal communication mode in Russia of the present (Sahnin 2014).

By the middle of 2011, the dynamics of social activity in Russia was relatively low. There were still some campaigns of social protest and random demonstrations against the infringement of democratic rights and freedoms, yet none of them were considered to be impactful breakthroughs. However, the end of 2011 brought some changes in the mode of communication inside the country.

Many experts believe that Dmitry Medvedev, the country's president in the 2008-2002 period, has not managed to get out from under the political 'shadow' of Putin, who allegedly

chose him as the most powerless as well as loyal candidate to be a temporary successor (Gessen 2012). At the same time, with the beginning of Medvedev's presidency, a new form of diarchy (the ruling tandem) was born into Russian politics. Initially, the West and the local liberals had hopes that Medvedev would be a consistent liberal, however, it soon became clear that this was not the case. Medvedev started his career in the Kremlin by increasing the presidential term to six years, and the Duma's to five. At the end of his presidency, a new law on political parties (less stringent in terms of requirements for registration) was implemented, and it was decided, to reinstate the election of governors. However, doubts existed about these measures having a significant impact on political life in Russia. It was Putin's return to the presidency (announced in September 2011), which became the breaking point that primed the process of changing the mass attitude and the breakdown of social forces in the state.

A group of Austria-based scholars proposed a method of assessing fraud in the elections and proved that the Russian legislative election in 2011 was rigged. In particular, the so-called stuffing for some candidates was found (Klimek *et. al* 2012). Statistical analysis of the elections in Russia was held by several Russian mathematicians directly after the voting process in December 2011. Despite the fact that those results were not published in peer-reviewed journals, they had a big impact on society. At rallies that followed the elections some people even had posters of a specific mathematical content. One of the authors of the publication Stefan Turner told *Deutsche Welle* that in the case of Russia, they were able to assess the extent of the fraud. He stated that without the manipulation the ruling party 'United Russia' would have won not more than 40 percent of the votes instead of the official 50 percent ('United Russia' Wins... 2011).

At that instant, an extensive segment of Russian population was dissatisfied with the so-called 'reshuffle' between Medvedev and Putin, and, eventually, the situation led to the consolidation of discontented people at all societal levels, including a sizable part of the Russian elite. Hence, the society was split from top to bottom. This process was going along with the intensive campaign against the political party in power. Moreover, an additional meaningful factor that influenced this evolution was the high development of the Internet and social networks, which allowed to quickly share information with the public. In this way, the preconditions of street protests were rising (Sahnin 2014).

1.2 A sign of a mass protest movement

The Russian protest movement in 2011-2012 was *not* a revolution. It did not go beyond the borders of the capital, or many other big cities. It did not include the majority of the population, and it did not include in its agenda, the many important questions regarding national life. Nevertheless, in the background of Russian ‘stable’ politics (which was ruled by almost the same political elite for more than a decade), this movement was a dramatic shift. For the first time in many years, activists of civil movements and common citizens (to a certain extent) formed an organized group that became a key component of the internal evolution of the country (Greene 2014).

It is necessary to investigate the development of mass protests in depth. It so happens, that since the very beginning, oppositional events have been associated with Bolotnaya Square in Moscow. Three significant campaigns, including meetings and demonstrations, took place there on 10 December 2011, 4 February 2012, and 6 May 2012.

On the day of parliamentary elections, 4 December 2011, several protests were held by activists, in which a few hundred people participated. According to the information provided by police, 258 people were arrested by the end of that day (Fedorov 2014). On 6 December 2011, the opposition was unsatisfied with the outcomes of the elections, and organized unauthorized meetings in the center of Moscow at Triumphalnaya Square on Tverskaya Street (the Russian capital city’s main street), adjacent to the Pushkinskaya Metro station. The government attempted to stand against the fast-growing opposition at that time, organizing counter-rallies of youth movements of the, ‘United Russia’. It became clear that the situation in the society was changing dramatically. Within a few days, the action against allegedly unfair elections escalated into mass protests that were accompanied by mass detentions of the participants.

The ‘liberal opposition’ group of media, such as *Echo of Moscow*, *Novaya Gazeta*, *Lenta.ru* remained sharply critical regarding the official Kremlin. However, the attitude of the few ‘neutral’ media sources such as *Kommersant*, *RBK*, and *Vedomosti* changed by increasing the number of publications and expert analytical materials about the ‘objective reduction’ of Putin’s popularity (Sahnin 2014).

1.2.1 Protest on 10 December 2011 (the First Bolotnaya)

According to the [interactive map](#) that appeared on the Internet on 9 December, the protests against the allegedly unfair elections were to be held in 141 cities on 3 continents. Along with inhabitants of 99 Russian cities, people living in New York, Canberra, Vancouver, Dublin, Seoul, Tokyo, and Tel Aviv decided to show their disagreement with mass violations and falsifications at the elections on 4 December. The opposition rally on Bolotnaya Square was the most numerous one in the history of Putin's Russia (Bigg 2013). To this day, there are still debates about how many people attended the rally in Moscow on 10 December. At first, police estimated the number of protesters to be 7,000. Then, they raised the number to 25,000. From the podium of the rally, it was claimed that there were 100 and even 150 thousand people. Most journalists estimated the number of protesters to be between 50 and 85 thousand. From 3,000 to 7,000 people protested in Novosibirsk, and the same number of people were in Yekaterinburg and about 10,000 citizens showed up in St. Petersburg. In dozens of other Russian cities, the number of protester ranged from a few dozen to 2,000 (Sahnin 2014). Some of the meetings were not approved by the local authorities, and participants were dispersed by the police.

The majority of the speakers at Bolotnaya square were representatives of the Russia's media and cultural elites, including journalists, writers, and actors. Among them were Leonid Parfyonov, Dmitry Bykov, Boris Akunin, Tatyana Lazareva, Yevgenia Albats, Sergei Parkhomenko, Oleg Kashin, and Sergei Shargunov. With rare exceptions, almost all of them had liberal to very moderate political views. In social life, their involvement in politics had almost never been direct – almost none of them was ever associated with an active political force. Another category of speakers were liberal politicians (many of them had been high-ranking officials in the relatively recent past) and representatives of the so-called systemic opposition (i.e. parties, Sergey Mitrokhin, Mikhail Kasyanov, Boris Nemtsov, as well as Oksana Dmitrieva, Gennady Gudkov, and Ilya Ponomarev from the 'Fair Russia', and Andrey Klychkov from the Communist party) (Albaz 2012).

Most of the speakers talked about the electoral fraud and ballot-stuffing, demanding the organisation of re-elections (that idea was supported by participants' loud shouts). An important

requirement was to release those who were arrested at previous protests' post-election weeks, including Alexey Navalny, Ilya Yashin, and Sergey Udaltsov (the latter was detained by the police on 10 December, immediately after he was freed from the previous arrest). There was also the idea of a simple recount; this thought received no less crowd support than more radical demands for re-election. Some speakers urged the people to prepare for further street protests and the presidential elections in March 2012.

The overall result of the protest on 10 December 2011, was summarised by the resolution that was announced from the podium. This document included the following five demands: recognition of the results of elections on 4 December as invalid; the organisation of re-elections; the resignation of the Central Election Commission Chairman, Vladimir Churov; the investigation of violations that occurred during the elections on 4 December; and the change of legislation on elections and registration of unregistered parties (Riabov 2015). From the stage, it was also proclaimed that the participants would give the government two weeks to make the aforementioned changes. Otherwise, the people would organize a new protest in Moscow, and the regions, on 24 December. Thus, a group of leaders was formed who took over the coordination of the protest campaign(s). They were ready to plan new promotions, develop requirements and resolutions.

1.2.2 The December 2011 Sakharov Avenue Protest

The rally on Sakharov Avenue on 24 December 2011 was even higher in numbers if compared to the one on Bolotnaya Square. According to the official data, the number of people who came to the event in Moscow exceeded 30,000, while organisers claimed there were 120,000 people ('Aktzii Protesta'...2013). The protesters concluded that the authorities had not adequately responded (if at all) to the declaration announced on 10 December. Therefore, the new resolution almost was not much different from what was adopted during the Bolotnaya Square protest – its first five paragraphs were identical to the ones of the previous document. However, three more points were added: to create a Moscow association of voters in order to investigate violations and control over elections; to coordinate the work of observers throughout

the country; and to ask the citizens of Russia not to support Putin at the elections on 4 March 2012 (Sahnin 2014). A distinctive feature of this meeting was the fact that few people from the former official establishment also attended the event. Among them, Russia's former Minister of Finance Alexey Kudrin and a former prefect of one of the Moscow's districts and a member of pro-Kremlin political party 'United Russia' (Kalk 2015). Boris Nemtsov, the country's former Deputy Prime Minister of the Yeltsin era and one of the main organisers of the Sakharov Avenue gathering, made an announcement that the date for a new protest in Moscow will be scheduled for February 2012, before the presidential election.

The Sakharov Avenue protest was better organised than the previous one, thus, communication mode wise, it led to a strong cohesion among activists within the civil society. The main outcome of the rally was a common acknowledgement that the Russian middle class, given the number of participants in the protest, would be ready to contribute to the process of democratisation of the country's political system.

1.2.3 Protest on 6 May 2012 (the Second Bolotnaya)

On 6 May 2012, the day before the inauguration of Putin, the opposition and their supporters gathered on Bolotnaya square for a rally, which they called the 'March of millions', intending to protest against the 'new'-'former' president of the country. The event had been agreed with the authorities and took place under the slogan 'For honest government! For Russia without Putin!' The main organiser of this demonstration was the head of the 'Left Front' Sergei Udaltsov. The rally turned into riots and clashes with the police - dozens of people were injured, more than 400 demonstrators were detained ('Rassledovanie Besporyadkov'... 2013).

After the event, the Investigative Committee of Russia launched a comprehensive criminal case on the fact of "call to riot". In total, 30 people were officially accused in breaking the law (Volkov 2012), and 11 of them were later pardoned in December 2013 by the presidential decree. As for Udaltsov and Razvozhayev, the leaders of the 'Left Front', their activities were picked out to become a base for a separate criminal case, and, on 24 July 2013, the court

eventually found them guilty of organising mass riots, issuing an imprisonment for 4.5 years (Aleksandrov 2015).

While the Russian investigation considers the events on Bolotnaya square as mass riots, an independent international evaluation concluded that the violation of the public order on 6 May 2012 was largely a consequence of the actions of the authorities, primarily the police, whose operation was estimated as disproportionate and inappropriate to the circumstances: the citizens' right to freedom of gathering was unlawfully restricted; the police did not keep the contact with the organizers of the protest; police officers made a human stampede and exercised no motivated mass arrests (Nehezin 2013).

The aforementioned 2011-2012 mass protests contributed to the tectonic shift in the behaviour of the Russian top political elites. Those events had a tremendous impact on the Russian communication mode. Due to the anti-government demonstrations, the Kremlin emphasized the belief that political protest is a threat to sovereignty. Thus, the "politics of fear" began consisting of a series of initiatives to combat opponents of the regime (Gelman 2017). Despite the significant strengthening of the Kremlin, "the politics of fear" brought only a partial effect: it suppressed the symptoms of the crisis phenomena that emerged during the 2011-2012 protests, but it could not overcome their causes (Ibid. 2017). The evident proof of that is the result of the Moscow Mayoral election in 2013, where Navalny, a high-profile oppositional candidate, won over 600,000 votes (Latynina 2013). Another example is the result of the parliamentary election in 2016: the Kremlin's measures against the "politicisation" of the population led to a drop in turnout (Gelman 2017).

1.2.4 A new amendment to the law

In June 2012, the new amendment to the law on rallies was adopted by the parliament and signed by the president ('Putin Podpisal Popravki', 2012). The experts pointed out, that the new law on rallies, contained contradictions in regard to the fundamental principles of the criminal code, administrative code, civil code, and the labor code of the Russian Federation. An opposition politician, Vladimir Ryzhkov (2012), was quoted in *The Moscow Times* noting that

the new version of the law increased fines for organizers and participants of the demonstrations, and added new sanctions for the people involved in “spontaneous meetings”. Moreover, by then the government was able to declare *any* meeting of people to be an ‘unauthorized action’. The government could also declare, that any place in the city was forbidden for demonstrations and marches. As a result, people could be prosecuted for having conversations about such events in the Internet. In this context, Williamson (2014) argued that “[t]he Russian authorities want to criminalize public criticism. [...] They’re threatening peaceful demonstrators with prison time”.

1.3 The post-Crimea Nemtsov factor in 2015

Due to the aforementioned new restrictions, there was noticeable decline of the society-wide protest movement in Russia. However, the post-Crimea time started moderating any type of communication within the Russian Federation. The official Kremlin, while ‘banking’ on Russia’s highly influential role within international system, has been deliberately instigating a certain international discontent, antagonising the world’s largest country’s interrelations with the political West. Therefore, the opposition forces became more open in criticizing Putin and actions, significantly broadening the scope of intra-society communication mode.

Boris Nemtsov, one of the most (if not the most) vocal critics of the official Kremlin, was assassinated on 27 February 2015 not far from the Red Square (‘Boris Nemtsov Shot Dead’... 2015). During the Yeltsin era, he was the Nizhny Novgorod region’s governor and, later, first deputy prime minister. Nemtsov was one of the most influential personalities in the process of introduction of capitalism into the Russian post-Soviet economy. He was supposed to be one of the organisers of the opposition protest that was planned to be held next day after his death. A group of experts, interviewed by the *Russian BBC* bureau, expressed no reasonable doubts in the political nature of the crime. They pointed out that Nemtsov, along with Navalny and Mikhail Khodorkovsky, were the top three leaders of the opposition and had a relatively good electoral potential; before his death, Nemtsov was holding a public post of a deputy of the Yaroslavl regional parliament (Krechetnikov 2015).

A few hours before his assassination, Nemtsov participated on *Echo of Moscow*, a high-profile radio station, talking about the direct role of the Russian Federation in launching and then escalating a war in the Ukrainian Donbass and the ubiquitous corruption in Russia. Immediately after the murder of Nemtsov, Russian president noted that the crime has a provocative element against the Kremlin, and this view was supported by some pro-government politicians and commentators. In particular, the co-chair of the National Strategy Council Sergei Markov said that Nemtsov was assassinated by those who wanted a ‘Russian Maidan’ (Walker 2015). On 1 March, the Nemtsov’s mourning rally, according to various estimates, gathered from 20,000 to 50,000 people, and by the end of the event the police made about 50 arrests for “violating public order” (Bykova 2016).

The Nemtsov’s murder made headlines worldwide and in Russia – Putin himself, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and US President Barack Obama brought their condolences. The leaders of Western countries and international organizations (UN, OSCE, the Council of Europe) unanimously condemned the assassination and expressed hope for a fair investigation. In the European Parliament’s resolution issued on 12 March the death of Nemtsov was described as the most notorious political murder in modern Russian history (European Parliament 2015).

The murder of Nemtsov, regardless of its motives and contractors, was a continuation of the switch to the repressive policy, which the Russian government carried out against its public opponents after the Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012. The repressive policy was intended to stop the spread of protest activity, which, unexpectedly for the government, was manifested in the country in the winter of 2011-2012.

1.4 The Navalny factor in 2017, new protests, and the upcoming presidential election

On 26 March 2017, for the first time since 2012, a number of serious mass protests appeared on the Russian political landscape yet again. The reason for that was the Kremlin’s official reaction (or rather, its absence) on the video ‘*Он Вам не Димон*’ (‘He Is Not Dimon to You’) that was produced by Anti-Corruption Foundation (ACF), an NGO founded by Navalny. The material

delivered a ‘message’ about numerous real estate holdings of Russia’s prime minister Medvedev, which were assigned and associated with a number of different as well as interlinked charity organisations. This video published on 2 March, hit a record number of views on *YouTube* — around 25 million, but there was no reaction from the government regarding the facts specified in the material. It was the reason for Navalny to call for a country-wide protest against corruption, proposing ‘On Vam Ne Dimon’ as the slogan.

A formal request for holding the rally were officially sent to city councils in 100 major Russian localities, but only 21 cities’ local authorities approved it. Nevertheless, in a majority of cities the rallies still took place. The ACF broadcasted the protests against corruption on their *YouTube* channel. By the end of the rally in Moscow, 933 people were detained by the police; that was more than the number of arrests on Bolotnaya square in 2012. These seizures at this demonstration became the most massive in the post-Soviet Russian Federation. Navalny himself was detained, even before the beginning of the event in Moscow had started (Macfarquhar 2017). This figure, now-a-days is the most prominent when it comes to the opposition movement in the Russian Federation. Alexei Navalny is: a lawyer, political and financial activist, politician, and the leader of unregistered political party, ‘The Party of Progress’.

In 2008, Navalny became famous by publishing evidentiary facts of embezzlement of funds in the largest Russian corporations. Being a lawyer, he founded the ‘Union of Minority Shareholders’ and engaged into court disputes with *Gazprom*, *Rosneft* and *Transneft* in order to seek for transparency and accountability of these corporations. Navalny established the ACF, which focuses on drafting law proposals on developing anti-corruption mechanisms, publishes different journalism-framed investigations on illicit enrichment of Russian officials. In a significant addition, as previously mentioned, Navalny participated in the September 2013 mayor election in Moscow. According to the official records, he became the runner-up, gaining 27.24% or 632,697 ballot in favour. He was supported by a higher number of Muscovites than the remaining contenders from the top-6 combined. Therefore, it could be argued that, from September 2013, the 2018 presidential elections became a major moderator for intra-society communicational activities in the Russian Federation – from that point, Navalny was clearly aiming at the country’s presidency.

Navalny has developed a new format of documentary videos about the corruption of the higher officials of the country. Currently, he has an international pop-star level of popularity with 1.6 million subscribers on his *YouTube* channel, his videos are been discussed immediately after their release. The protests in March 2017 have shown that the political and civil society leaders of today work primarily with online audience that is growing every year, especially among young people (14-34 years).

A separate tool that effects modern protest audience specifically is *YouTube*. Every year this giant platform gains millions followers being an alternative to television. Young people who support opposition nowadays do not watch television and to a lesser extent use the official media on the Internet, but rather get information through the social networks where it is possible to find very diverse approaches of political information. In this environment, foreign and opposition media platforms get more and more popular being more ‘flexible’ and attractive for young audience of the Internet than the official ones. Navalny was the first Russian politician who began using a *YouTube*-based platform for communicating with his existing and prospective supporters.

Since 2015, Navalny has dramatically changed his approach on formulating the content by making it less complicated but straighter to the point. The older audience who do not like simplifications and, on contrast, appreciate intelligence reacted with incredulity, but Navalny and his team kept following their own way (‘International Youth Forum’ 2017). The results were seen at the protests in March 2017. The only thing the Navalny’s team did not figure out was that the audience of *YouTube* is even younger than it was expected, that is why the protest movement ‘dragged’ a high number of secondary and high school students into it. The latter factor became yet another new feature of the intra-society communicational process in Russia, connecting the process of engagement with ethics and discussions of morality.

2. THE POST-CRIMEA AND THE 2018 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

The 2017 protest activity in Russia, if compared to the protest movement in 2011-2013, has a number of significant differences when it comes to the ideological structure of the audience – the two major moderators (the upcoming presidential elections and the post-Crimea external status quo) started effecting all segments of Russia's every-day life. In 2011-2013, the protesters were divided into 4 groups: liberals, leftists, nationalists and non-partisan activists. In numbers, the largest group of protesters (bound by liberal views on politics and economics) was followed by the political Left and the nationalists. It turns out, the left, the nationalists and the liberals joined the protests with their own slogans and programmes, finding common ground only on the most basic political demands. This had a very positive impact on the increase in the number of protesters during the first demonstrations, but ended up reducing the overall protest activity, due to the differences in positions and requirements.

Eventually, the conflict between the leaders of the opposition was growing. Additionally, the authorities 'counter-attacks' aimed at discrediting the opposition leaders, and those actions were implemented in a highly productive way. What was even more significant, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, especially its militarily 'hot' 2014-2015 period that was featured by a high number of casualties from both sides, also had an impact – it started the disintegration processes among all political and ideological groups in Russia, including the opposition. By analysing all the ideological groups in Russia at that moment, it can be concluded, that each of them supported either one side of the conflict (Russia), or another (Ukraine). Thus, the Ukrainian crisis showed simulation of modern political ideologies, which means, that political organizations and actors, abandon ideological agenda in favor of, for example, opposition. In this case, ideology serves political purposes, and, therefore, is simulation (artificial) in nature. It turns out that ideological policy markers, are used only for the mobilization of ideological groups, but these markers are not strictly abided. Ideology has become a tool, not the driving force behind policy. In addition, the process of reducing the role of ideological groups, leftists and nationalists in the first place,

was associated with the collapse and defeat of the main actors: some were arrested and received a prison sentence, some organizations were banned, and others fell apart due to the ideological differences on the Ukrainian crisis.

This all led to the fact, that in 2017, the protesters began to have more in common than before, leading them to become more structurally unified. At the same time, protest leaders were able to focus on working with public masses – with people who do not pay as much attention to the differences of political ideologies, who could be unified by having more simple and domestic political demands, the main of which, is the fight against corruption.

2.1 The Navalny factor reloaded

Navalny, a potential presidential candidate, being accused by the authorities in the framework of two criminal cases, suddenly found it highly challenging for himself to keep communicating with the Russian civil society from a relatively high position as a top opposition leader. On 8 February 2017, the city of Kirov's Leninsky Court found Navalny guilty of organising the theft of RUB 16 million from *Kirovles* enterprise. Navalny was given a 5-year suspended jail term in addition to a fine of RUB 500,000. It was almost a 'repetition' of the verdict issued by the same Court on 18 July 2013, when Navalny was sentenced to 5 years in prison, later changed to a probation.

The turning point occurred when the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) approved the appeal of Navalny, determining that he was convicted for actions that were indistinguishable from ordinary commercial mediation; the judgment stated that the criminal law was unreasonably interpreted to the detriment of the defendants (Navalny was one of them), which led to a manifestly unreasonable trial outcome ('Russia's Conviction of Opposition' ...2016). The case was forwarded for reconsideration, but the February 2017 decision, as discussed, was still not in Navalny's favour. On 5 September 2017, the European Implementation Network (EIN) in a brief for the Committee of Ministers stated that "[t]he Kirovles case was widely regarded as politically motivated and aimed at preventing political and anti-corruption activities of Alexey Navalny. The case was also widely used by Russia's state-controlled media to damage Navalny's reputation" (EIN 2017).

Another criminal case, in which Navalny was involved is known as the Yves Rocher case. In December 2014, together with his younger brother and business partner Oleg, Navalny was charged with embezzling RUB 30 million from two companies, including the Russian branch of the French cosmetics giant *Yves Rocher* (Gabowitch 2016). The older Navalny was given a suspended sentence of 3.5 years, while his brother was sentenced to a prison term of the same duration (Ibid. 2016). On 17 October 2017, the ECHR decreed that the fraud case against the Navalny brothers on the complaint of the Yves Rocher's complaint was processed and conducted in violation of the right to a fair trial ('ECHR Prisudil' ...2017). According to the judgment of the ECHR, Russia should pay the Navalny brothers EUR 76,000 to cover their moral and financial damage. At the same time, the ECHR panel refused to consider the Yves Rocher case to be politically motivated, with three judges stating that it was necessary to consider the possible political implications of the case (Ibid. 2017). The Russian Ministry of Justice stated that it did not agree with the ECHR's position, but noted that the court reduced the amount of the requested compensation and did not recognise the political motives of the Russian verdict. Russia intends to wait for the enactment of the decision and then to decide on a possible appeal (ECHR...2017).

On 17 October 2017, two subsequent laws were proposed in Russia. Firstly, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) proposed an increase in parental responsibility for children's participation in unsanctioned acts. A representative of the MIA introduced amendments that would allow the punishment not only of children – whose motive is generally a curiosity, and who may not understand the repercussions of their actions – but also of their parents. In addition, the MIA stated that schools were responsible for the education of youth. Moreover, earlier, the State Duma had proposed the reduction of the age of criminal responsibility to 12 years ('Vozrast Ugolovnoi Otvetstvennosti' 2017). Evidently, this initiative was a response to the anti-government of Navalny, in which many young people were involved. The protests had included many individuals under the legal age, as mentioned earlier in this paper.

Secondly, the Russian president gave the MIA authority over the candidates on issues related to Russian citizenship, criminal records, and extremism. The police were tasked to verify applicants on request of election commissions and to notify them in case of the detection of foreign citizenship or residence permits, criminal records, date and type of punishment, date of

removal or redemption, participation in extremist crimes, or presence of administrative responsibility (Ibid., 2017). Arguably, these moves were treated by the opposition as preventive in the context of Navalny's prospective participation in the 2018 presidential elections.

While the legal process on the abovementioned criminal cases were taking place, Olga Mikhaylova, the Navalny's lawyer, reported that, according to the laws on presidential elections, Navalny would not be able to participate in the presidential campaign due to his conviction for embezzlement. As stated in the Russian Constitution, each citizen may be elected to public office, excepting those who are in prison. Thus, Navalny's case evidences a legal conflict, and it is unclear whether Navalny is qualified to run for the presidency or not.

On the official side, Ella Pamfilova, the head of the Russian Central Election Commission (CEC), claimed that Navalny falsely interpreted the Russian Constitution, but she did not provide any details on the matter. According to Pamfilova, the opponent Navalny will be able to participate in elections that take place after 2028 ('Pamfilova: Navalny Smozhet', 2017). On 25 December 2017, the CEC officially made its decision to deny Navalny's registration as a candidate in the 2018 upcoming presidential election, with Navalny immediately reacting with an urge for his supporters to boycott the election ('CIK Otkazalsya...' 2017). In the context of this paper, the Navalny's call on boycott represents an additional feature of the intra-society communicational activity in Russia. The Spokesperson of the European External Action Service stated that this decision casts serious doubt on the existence of political pluralism in Russia and democratic election in 2018 (Decision of the Russian...2017).

2.2 The Russia's first female presidential candidate

In September 2017, many Russia-based media sources – for example, *BBC*, *Vedomosty*, and *Novaya Gazeta* – began suggesting about the Kremlin's prospective intention to strategically push for a 'safe' nomination of a presidential woman-candidate to increase public interest in the process. On 18 October 2017, Ksenia Sobchak, a media celebrity, announced that she had plans to run for the presidency in 2018 ('Ksenia Sobchak announced...' 2017).

Sobchak is a daughter of Anatoly Sobchak, the late politician, the first democratically-elected mayor of Saint Petersburg, as well as an academic mentor of both Putin and Medvedev. She became interested in politics during the wave of mass protests that began in 2011 at Bolotnaya square. In her video message widely shared on social networks, Sobchak called herself the candidate 'against all'. As the 'against all' option no longer existed on the election ballot, Sobchak proposed that Russians vote for her instead. This statement was received with a high degree of ambivalence.

Opposition media sources call the Sobchak's nomination a creative and powerful move by the Kremlin (Lukianova 2017). Kirill Rogov, a political analyst, considers Sobchak a foil of Navalny who is to be deprived of his right to candidacy and thus is attempting to organise a public campaign against the current political regime. For him, this will not likely provide the right to be elected, the right to hold meetings and demonstrations or, finally, the right to political competition (Polovinko, 2017). Considering that Navalny's chances of reaching the candidacy status were all time low, it is clear that his real political goal is to make his denial of access to the election a political issue, which would therefore de-legitimise the future victory of Putin. For the elections to appear as a more democratic 'venture', the Kremlin was accused in 'creating' an opposition campaign, such as the one that is led by Sobchak. By taking part in the election and by repeating Navalny's agenda in a softer way, the Sobchak's campaign is likely to be accused by some of the representatives of the opposition as well as a certain segment of the Russian civil society in pretending to demonstrate that the opposition in Russia exists, and that it is possible for ordinary citizens to participate in elections, organise protests, and engage in debates with the Kremlin. Until the end of the presidential campaign and further on, there is a likelihood for Sobchak to always be associated with a movement that contributes to the legitimisation of the Putin's political regime. With necessity, these accusations will become an integral part of the Russian civil society's communicational discourse in years to come.

Some political experts have already compared the contemporary situation with the 2012 Russian election, in which Mikhail Prokhorov, a Russian tycoon and the owner of the NBA giants the Brooklyn Nets, decided to run for the presidency, allegedly on Putin's request. His application was approved by the CEC, while Grigory Yavlinsky, the leader of a liberal political

party Yabloko, was denied a registration ('Kak Politiki v RF...' 2017). Furthermore, Yekaterina Schulman was cited by Luhn (2017), arguing that "there is a need for a higher voter turnout especially in cities and among the younger population [...] this is the scenario they have managed to come up with".

Despite the above-presented claims, the Russian president's press secretary Dmitry Peskov has refuted the speculation that the Kremlin is involved in masterminding the Sobchak presidential campaign. On the same day when Sobchak announced her candidacy, in an interview, Peskov noted that Sobchak faces all the requirements of the Russian Constitution applicable to those who run for the presidency.

2.3 The 2018 presidential election: a predictable outcome?

Both in Russia and internationally, many scholars and practitioners in the field of international relations believe that, after the 2018 presidential elections, Putin will comfortably serve as his country's president for another term, and that the current political regime will not change its direction (Ogawa, 2017).

In December 2016, Navalny declared himself an independent candidate, challenging what he usually describes as bureaucratic-oligarchic authoritarianism of Putin and his followers. The response of the regime was followed by arrests, prohibitions, criminal proceedings, and open announcements that demonstrated that Navalny would not be allowed to participate in the elections under any circumstances. Such measures, however, led to a significant rise of Navalny's popularity in Russia and internationally. The actions of the Russian government transformed Navalny into a symbol of opposition, and the hopes of those dissatisfied with the Kremlin began to focus on him. Despite the claims of the Kremlin experts, the number of Navalny supporters is constantly growing, as is the Russian economic crisis (Volkov 2017). Navalny's supporters are exasperated with the regime and have lost faith in the government's ability to improve circumstances in Russia. This has far-reaching implications for the Russian political sphere. The main problem for the Kremlin regarding future elections is that none of the

usual leaders of the Duma parties can successfully oppose Navalny. In other words, there is a lack of confidence among Kremlin officials that Zyuganov, Zhirinovskiy, or Mironov, who constitute the administration of United Russia, could attract or delay the necessary votes. Therefore, the leaders of the Duma parties—and all parties—have become useless in maintaining the illusion of a competitive election. As a consequence of this new reality, the Kremlin has decided to self-nominate candidates who are not considered dangerous to the maintenance of the current regime. In essence, these candidates are expected to play spoiler of Navalny's supporters and undecided voters. As a result, the media has linked the first independent candidates, including Sobchak, Gordon, and Panina, to the government. Because of the Kremlin's interference in independent candidacies, the concept of parliamentary parties, which emerged ideologically and politically many years ago, has lost its meaning as that structure has become useless for the current regime.

By the end of 2017, Putin's popularity ratings (62-65%) remains at extremely high levels compared to the ratings of the most Western leaders, nevertheless, he no longer has 80-85% that was the norm during his second presidential term (Gelman 2017).

Putin should win the 2018 Russian presidential election to stay in power. However, Putin can stay in power even without the election, for his regime controls both Houses of Parliament and has already made significant changes to Russian electoral arrangements without any resistance from the public. These changes include the cancellation and return of gubernatorial elections, the cancellation of mayoral elections in many cities, the cancellation and return of single-member districts for elections to the State Duma, the change of the order of forming the Federation Council, the extension of the term of the State Duma to five years, and the extension of the presidential term to six years. The presidential election is necessary, however, to demonstrate that Putin is the most popular politician and the legally-elected President. Putin must achieve the appearance that all electoral races necessarily represent candidates of all major political forces: communists, nationalists, social democrats, and liberals. It is also important that Putin emphasize the fairness of vote counting, which instigated the introduction of web cameras during the last election. In other words, Vladimir Putin must hold the election not to win the presidency, but to win the presidency legitimately.

2.4 The post-Crimea Russia and its international ‘posture’

The US–Russia relations began to deteriorate quickly in 2014, reaching their lowest point in recent years. The United States and the EU considered the occupation and annexation of the Crimean peninsula an unconstitutional act, stating that “the entrenchment of separatist enclaves in Donetsk and Luhansk provinces directly challenge the post-Cold War European state system” (Allison 2014).

In the spring of 2014, the United States froze its cooperation with Russia in many areas. Several projects planned under the Presidential Commission, including bilateral discussions with Russia on trade and investment, were suspended. In addition, cooperation between NASA and the Russian Space Agency (Roskosmos), and between the two nations’ energy departments, was halted. The US imposed sanctions against Russian individuals, including members of Russia’s powerful elite and Putin’s inner circle, as well as against Russian legal entities. Since 2014, this list has been expanded 17 times, and today it affects 160,413 physical and legal entities. The sanctions against Russia were designed to destabilize the Russian economy, as they affected state banks and major corporations, including energy companies Rosneft and Novatek; the country’s largest bank, Sberbank; and one of the largest defense conglomerates, Rostec.

After this initiative from the United States, the EU and other partners of the US and the EU also established anti-Russian sanctions. Russia reacted by establishing counter-sanctions, including food embargos, and in October 2016, Russia suspended the operation of agreements on the disposal of weapons-grade plutonium and Russian cooperation in scientific research and development in the nuclear and energy spheres.

In July 2017, Russia demanded that the United States reduce the size of its diplomatic mission in Russia by firing more than 700 diplomats. In response, the United States stopped issuing non-immigrant visas at its Russian consulates. Since September 2017, Russian citizens have only been able to obtain a US visa at the Moscow embassy (The Guardian, 2017). In 2017, the percentage of tourist visas refused to Russian citizens increased to 11.61% from 9.29% in 2016 (U.S. Department of State, 2017). These Western sanctions against Russia confirm that the

stage of world history that began after the Cold War and the collapse of communism has come to an end, and that today Russian diplomacy has entered a new phase.

The Western system of anti-Russian sanctions is based on two assumptions: first, that the sanctions build consensus among Western countries regarding the goal of halting Russian aggression against Ukraine, forcing Russia to negotiate peacefully and avoid war, and exerting pressure in case of Russia's refusal to negotiate; and second, that the sanctions will reduce the economic losses of the West (Dreger et al., 2016). The purpose of these sanctions is not to make the costs unbearable for Russia, thus threatening the whole system and provoking regime change. Nor is the goal to bring the Russian economy to collapse, as this scenario might further destabilize the country's future. Rather, to maintain unity on the issue of sanctions, the West acts according to the minimum need. The West does not want to cause excessive harm either to Russia or to themselves, and therefore the unity of the West is more valuable than the ultimate success of sanctions against Russia.

Considering the above-stated indications that Russia has become a political "fortress" and that the nature of its government will not change while power remains in Putin's hands, it can be concluded that the Western system of political sanctions will prove unable to eliminate the prevailing cause of the conflict associated with the nature of the Russian system. This gives the Kremlin the ability to test different methods of survival, including the exertion of a destabilizing effect on other states. However, the West's policy of sanctions clearly indicates to the Kremlin that further aggression against neighboring states will meet an even tougher reaction from the West that could cause great difficulty to Russia.

The West's decision to make the unprecedented step of imposing sanctions against post-communist Russia proves that liberal democracy has changed the key line of its politics. The West no longer considers Russia a safe partner and ally. Nevertheless, we must ask: does the imposition of sanctions mean that the West has developed a new strategic approach to Russia? This is debatable (Wang, 2015).

Political scientists and members of the European Council on Foreign Relations Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard concluded that "while the US and the EU felt that shared sanctions were their best course of action, they have no shared idea of what they are designed to

achieve” (Krastev, 2014). That the punitive measures of the West are linked to the controversial Minsk agreements mean that the West's reaction is, in fact, quite restrained. It takes time to see the results of imposed sanctions, as restrictive measures generally evidence a gradual, long-term effect. Nevertheless, the sanctions against Russia have caused comparatively immediate damage. First, the sanctions had a negative impact on the representatives of the Russian ruling class, who are associated with the West. For instance, a Russian oligarch from Putin’s inner circle, Yuri Kovalchuk, lost around 1 billion dollars due to his frozen bank accounts, and the monetary loss of the Rotenberg brothers, also businessmen and oligarchs, amounted to 3.7 billion dollars (Forbes). Additionally, these sanctions have strengthened the economic slowdown in Russia due to accelerated capital outflows, a reduction in financial resources in the country, Moscow’s distance from international financial markets, the financial crisis, and the distrust of Russia by foreign businesses (Connolly, 2016).

Russian-imposed counter-sanctions such as the ban on imports of meat, cheese, fish, vegetables, fruits, and dairy products from the EU, USA, Australia, Canada, Norway, and Turkey harm Russia much more than they harm the target countries, triggering a serious drop in consumption and inflation. However, national media sources claim the opposite (Ibid., 2016). In reality, the counter-sanctions are restrictions against the Russian population. Food production in Russia has increased, but so have prices. Higher prices have led to changed and lowered consumption, and, in turn, to reduced sales. Moreover, the overall quality of available food is lower than it was before the food embargo. By contrast, Europe suffered relatively little from Russian sanctions, as the latest publication of the European Commission confirms that a high level of European agri-food exports positively increased its trade balance to 2.2 billion euro (European Commission, 2017).

Western economic pressure, combined with other factors such as falling oil prices, the devaluation of the ruble, lack of investment in Russian companies, and the outflow of capital, increasingly influence the Russian economy. In 2015, Russian GDP fell by 3.7%, and the number of Russians living in poverty has risen from 15.5 million in 2013 to 19.8 million in 2016 (Schrad, 2017). It is notable that 73% of the Russian population thinks that the Russian economy is experiencing stagnation, but that 88% nevertheless support Putin’s course in foreign policy

(Semenova, 2017). Only 15% of the Russian population positively evaluate the US, and only 31% positively evaluate the EU (Ibid., 2017).

These sanctions have delivered a powerful blow to the international position of Russia, which constitutes a foundation of the Russian system. Because of its isolation on the world stage, Russia has lost much of its influence and leverage (Marten, 2016). The Russian government increasingly depends on state players and Putin's inner circle, and fails to consider the middle class, which continues to contribute to the weakening of the Russian economy and the Russian system. The survival mechanism chosen by the Kremlin only reinforces the split between the elite and society: between those who are protected from unfavorable economic and external conditions and those who feel the burden (Shuster, 2014).

On 2 August 2017 Donald Trump endorsed the law which states that within 180 days, approximately by February 2018, the US Treasury Department together with the Director of National Intelligence and the Secretary of State shall submit a detailed report about the Russian 'oligarchs' and senior officials involved in Russia's foreign policy. The bill contains 12 types of sanctions which could be imposed against those. The new restrictions can include freezing assets, such as property, revoking US visas, and banning US exports to those sanctioned. (Gaouette 2017)

Kremlin's change toward aggressive foreign policy after the annexation of Crimea and the conflict with the West over Ukraine was the 'asymmetrical response' to domestic political challenges. On the background of the national-patriotic mobilization with the aim of uniting society around a confrontational agenda dramatically intensified attacks on opponents of the regime. It is difficult to say to what extent the Kremlin truly believed that the regime change in Ukraine and other countries was a result of the subversive actions of the West, but this argument on the background of the propaganda campaign allowed the authorities to legitimize the tightening of repressive policy.

Western sanctions have not changed – and will not change – Putin's method of governance. The Kremlin is unlikely to give up its attempt to weaken the Ukrainian government because an independent and pro-European Ukraine would likely be a destabilizing influence on

the Russian system. Russia will not likely leave Crimea until it is governed by Putin, and the Kremlin will likely continue its attempt to preserve the legitimacy of its authority.

The presidential election in 2018 greatly moderates the situation not only inside the country, but also in the sphere of the Russian foreign policy. Putin announced the end of the war and the start of a new phase of settlement in Syria a month before his nomination for the presidential election (Goryashko 2017). The press service of the White House stated that during a telephone conversation between the leaders of the US and Russia, the Syrian issues with due consideration of the ending military operation and the mutual efforts to achieve peace in the world were thoroughly discussed (Ibid. 2017).

3. CONCLUSION

The authoritarian government of the Russian Federation is entering a period of decline. A growing number of experts and prominent past leaders of the ruling party support new structural adjustments. Conversely, the government led by Putin is not ready for such a transformation, and instead plans to retain its power and to implement strategic objectives to this end. The conflict between the recent national crises and the unbending commitment of the national leader and his entourage to maintain power will determine the Russian political agenda. An analysis of the prospects of Russia's ruling power must consider that the Russian regime is an authoritarian regime that simulates a liberal democracy. To stay in power, Putin's regime requires three pillars: devotion to the so-called elite, the support of the Russian people, and the relative loyalty of the West.

The widely-spread hope that the liberal opposition would be elected to the State Duma and would change the system from within seems quite elusive, as several opposition deputies refuse to be heard by the population. Moreover, the State Duma cannot radically change the political course pursued by the Russian President. The objective of Putin and his inner circle is to stay in power, and when any political competition is destroyed, the possibility of a fair trial is destroyed, as well. The ruling elite fears that it will lose its position, so it is doing everything in its power to ensure that its opposition has no opportunity to compete fairly. Putin has made many

attempts to strengthen his popularity among Russians, including proposing a change to the Constitution that has allowed him to rule up to the present time. Regimes grounded in personal power are unlikely to undergo serious alteration, as only one individual is responsible for important domestic and foreign policy decisions.

Over the past 18 years, Putin has faced the mass disaffection of the Russian people using the following methods, exercised by the elite, to maintain power. First, he strengthened the power unit and suppressed political discontent. By creating his image of a brave and strong man and promising a bright future for Russia, Putin reinforced the ideological motives of his supporters. However, as a result of his own mistakes and the general degradation of the Russian political system, Putin has lost the resources he once held, and his reputation has been tarnished as a result. For these reasons, Putin must now rely on force and coercion. Taking into consideration the facts presented in this paper that illustrate the regime's control over the protest movement, it can be concluded that Putin now depends on the willingness of his security forces to support his regime.

Consequently, Russian foreign policy is a mirror of domestic policy, and is driven by this policy. As Baldoni has argued, "influence groups and elites, external events, and domestic developments are all relevant drivers of foreign policy change as much as they affect the views of the real decision-maker: the predominant leader, Vladimir Putin" (Baldoni, 2016). Many believe that the creation of an external "enemy" distracts citizens from domestic problems. As Russia undergoes domestic crisis and devastation, and as it faces many internal conflicts and contradictions, the presentation of an external "enemy" unites the population. The older generation and much of the Russian population, who were born in the USSR and who lived in its totalitarian regime, are affected by the pro-governmental propaganda presented by the media. By contrast, the younger generations consider the current political situation of the state differently, focusing more on Western values, and on the use of new technologies and platforms to form their perception of the world. However, their voice is quite weak in the political sphere, and the liberal opposition does not have enough influence to change the contemporary political system. The statistics provided above demonstrate the result of the targeted media strategy to emphasize an "external" enemy that takes priority over internal, domestic issues.

Today, Russia is simultaneously embroiled in two conflicts— in Ukraine and Syria—in which its strategic goals have not been met, the point of further engagement has been lost, the exit strategy from these “high-risk venture capital investments” (Baldoni 2016) is unclear, and investments have become a “vulnerability factor” with the prospect of further escalation that could undermine the internal development of Russia. The unpredictable foreign policy decisions of Moscow, which may attempt to compensate for the weaker position of Russia in its conflict with the West, have also become a factor of vulnerability. Russia is now assumed to have the worst intentions: it is perceived as a threat, and rather than support Russia, potential allies fear its unpredictability.

Moscow could continue to act in the same spirit—solving one crisis by creating a new, more acute, crisis; refusing to engage in a discussion of corrective actions; and waiting for its inevitable transition to a post-Western world. However, there is no guarantee that this result will be different from the contemporary situation. New crises will create new obligations, new vulnerabilities, and new responses from rivals.

The shift of power in the Russian government will not necessarily mean a change from Putin to Navalny or to another opposition figure. Initially, it will mean the change of political course and priorities. No matter the name of the new President, it is essential to establish another political power with a different narrative of Russia’s internal development, as well as new approaches toward Russian relations with the West.

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