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Maybe Russia Will Completely Change in 2018 (Op-ed)

Reflections, rumors and predictions for the new year

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Andrei Nikerichev / Moskva News Agency

How will historians look back on the final years of this decade in Russia? They might do well to look at the closing years of earlier decades to guide their way.

The '20s: The final curtailing of economic freedoms and political factionalism, a "great turning point" towards totalitarianism and the absolute authority of the Leader;

The '30s: A time of political terror and preparations for war;

The '40s: The height of the Cold War, nuclear blackmail, the fight against cosmopolitanism, the growth of nationalistic and anti-Semitic propaganda;

The ‘50s: An ideological “thaw” and the flowering of culture, breakthroughs in science and technology;

The ‘60s: A post-thaw “tightening of the screws,” the fight against dissidents, the establishment of what would later be called a regime of stagnation;

The ‘70s: The agonies of stagnation, the downward slide into a bloody war in Afghanistan, an economic crisis and empty stores;

The ‘80s: Large-scale political and economic reforms known as “perestroika,” the rapid democratization of society;

The ‘90s: A national hangover following a binge of democracy, a deepening war in Chechnya, a financial crisis and a loss of confidence in the authorities;

The 2000s: Oil and gas wealth, increased corruption, peace and friendship with the West despite the first symptoms of superpower aggression in Georgia;

To understand which of these most closely resembles the current situation, consider the following major events of the past year:

— The centenaries

Just mention the date “1917” to any Russian or former Soviet citizen and it conjures up powerful associations: Major changes, revolution and a call to depose the country’s leadership.

Nothing is more frightening for Russia’s current leadership than the possibility of a repeat. So every effort was made to ensure that the Russian people would not so much as notice — much less celebrate — the anniversaries.

Related article: 100 Years After Revolution, Protests in Russia Are on the Rise

The centenary of the bourgeois-democratic anti-monarchist (even the words are terrible!) February Revolution went completely unnoticed, and only a rapid-fire series of cartoonish TV shows commemorated the October Revolution.

In both their essence and form, neither revolution offers anything that the regime of President Vladimir Putin would want to glorify.

— Youth protests

The youth has become a new factor in Russian politics — and a major headache for the ruling regime. Anti-corruption rallies, particularly on March 26 and June 12, showed that the new generation differs from the herd of the 2000s, which was content to channel its energy towards beer, legal highs and money.

The youth today is more active and more critical. And the regime’s desperate attempts to

“tame” the young upstarts have met little success.

— Alexei Navalny

Anti-corruption crusader and opposition leader Alexei Navalny is inarguably Russia’s “Person of the Year.”

He has presidential campaign offices in dozens of cities. He has clocked hundreds of street protests, he has rallied tens of thousands of volunteers and his videos and investigations online have been watched millions of times.

Plus, the authorities frequently arrest, detain and provoke him, and even use violence against him and his supporters. This country has never seen such “Goliath v. David” tactics, even in Soviet times.

At the same time, most Russians fear Navalny. First, many have a love-hate relationship with what they consider the “rotten intelligentsia.” What’s more, they have been taken in by the Kremlin’s clever “grey propaganda” that paints Navalny as a U.S. spy, a new Boris Yeltsin, or even another Josef Stalin.

— Foreign policy adventures

Since 2014, Russia has behaved like a bully who terrorizes well-clad, respectable citizens.

In addition to the unpopular and questionable foray into Syria, the Kremlin has started an outright cyber war with the West by employing legions of hackers, trolls, bots and other minions.

The goal was to secretly influence the foreign and even domestic policies of Russia’s Western enemies. The surprise attack worked, helping to usher in Brexit and Trump, but Putin’s cyber minions failed to cover their tracks, prompting a counter-response.

What’s more, Trump turned out to be less manageable than Putin had hoped.

— The West is showing its teeth

The leaders of the so-called “First World” were unforgivably slow in realizing an obvious truth — that you cannot believe a word Putin and his associates say. That, as the saying goes, “They lie even as they breathe.”

Actions the Kremlin finds humiliating — sanctions, blacklists and everything from the arrest of Russian oligarchs to the expulsion of the Russian Winter Olympic team — are becoming increasingly frequent.

Related article: Russia's Winter Olympics Doping Ban, Explained

The reason is not some pathological “Russophobia” as the Moscow authorities like to contend, but the West’s understandable desire to put an ill-mannered Russia in its place. The

Kremlin, not surprisingly, responds to all of this with indignation — feigned or otherwise — resentment, and denials.

Where from here?

Many of these events were predictable. With the exception, of course, of the Kremlin's internet banditry, the form and scale of which — as well as the proper retaliation – have yet to be fully determined.

But less foreseeable was the rebellion led by Russia's youth that is the most strategically important phenomenon of 2017. What surprises does the coming year hold? The increasingly unstable situation, especially with the economy, complicates predictions, but the following developments seem likely:

— Elections

This year's "new face" (tongue firmly in cheek), Vladimir Putin, will sweep the elections with approximately 70 percent of the vote. He'll even do it without "carousels" or the other usual polling station tricks.

Communist Party leader Pavel Grudinin and LDPR leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky will garner approximately 8-10 percent, independent candidate Ksenia Sobchak and the Yabloko party's candidate Grigory Yavlinsky will each take approximately 2-3 percent.

Of course, the authorities decided not to permit Navalny to run in the election, so his supporters will boycott numerous polling places in the major cities or otherwise attempt to disrupt the voting process. They will also hold protest rallies, right up until Putin's inauguration and riot police will round them up in hordes.

— Government

Putin will send Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev into retirement, either just before or just after the election. Medvedev will be replaced by either a liberal-technocrat such as former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin or Central Bank head Elvira Nabiullina.

Related article: Medvedev Could Be Replaced by Sobyanin or Nabiullina, Bloomberg Says

Alternatively, he might be replaced with a "get out to vote" patriot such as Sergei Glazyev or FSB Major General Georgy Rogozin. Or someone – anyone – who is completely neutral. But, I believe, some indecisive individual whom Putin can manipulate at will actually be installed in Medvedev's stead.

— FIFA World Cup

It will be the most miserable World Cup in history because nobody really wants it.

After the Sochi Olympics doping fiasco, Russia's leaders know that even the World Cup cannot restore their reputation. Russia's national team will undoubtedly give a mediocre

performance at best, and the whole enterprise is costing this country a fortune.

Aside from the inconvenience, ordinary citizens stand to gain nothing. Foreign fans will arrive in small numbers and with great caution – if they come at all.

— Foreign Policy

With peacekeeping as the goal, Russia's foreign policy will proceed slowly and reluctantly, in line with the country's shrinking economy – just as the West hoped it would.

Moscow will continue to haggle over Ukraine, seeking an end to sanctions in return for this or that concession. Russia will also partially fulfill the Minsk agreements and withdraw a major part of its forces from Syria.

When the commission investigating the crash of the MH17 flight over Donbass announces its conclusion that a Russian missile downed the Boeing aircraft, Moscow will declare the findings nothing but lies and slander.

The Kremlin will similarly deny that Russian hackers and trolls attacked the U.S. elections and democratic processes in Britain and France.

— Politics at home and the opposition

The right-leaning, conservative ideological bent will deepen until it starts to resemble monarchism.

Despite the commotion surrounding the World Cup, the authorities will commemorate the 100th anniversary of the assassination of Tsar Nicholas II and his family with pomp and fanfare.

Related article: Russia to Investigate If Last Tsar Was Shot in 'Ritual Killing'

The protest movement will stay strong, focusing its demands on the Moscow mayoral and St. Petersburg gubernatorial races. In addition to Navalny, new opposition leaders will emerge – both familiar faces such as Dmitry Gudkov, as well as relative newcomers from the younger crowd. Immediately after the presidential elections, Ksenia Sobchak will disappear from the political arena.

Some other rumors

— Rulers will adopt a new Constitution that will allow Putin to stay in power beyond 2024

— Putin will marry a descendant of the Romanov family'

—The authorities will re-introduce exit visas for Russians

— Putin will develop multiple sclerosis and hand over power to Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov

— U.S. hackers will influence Russia's elections and the ruble exchange rate

— Russian oligarchs will write a secret letter to Putin asking him to imprison Rosneft head Igor Sechin

— The Russian national football team will take a $1 billion bribe from Saudi Arabia to lose their World Cup game

And maybe, everything will turn out differently.

Maybe Putin's ruling regime will begin to show signs of weakness, a Russian Orthodox fundamentalist or progressive liberal will come to power, the country's financial system and economy will collapse, or a new "thaw" will improve Russia's relations with the West.

One year from now, we'll check back to see.

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