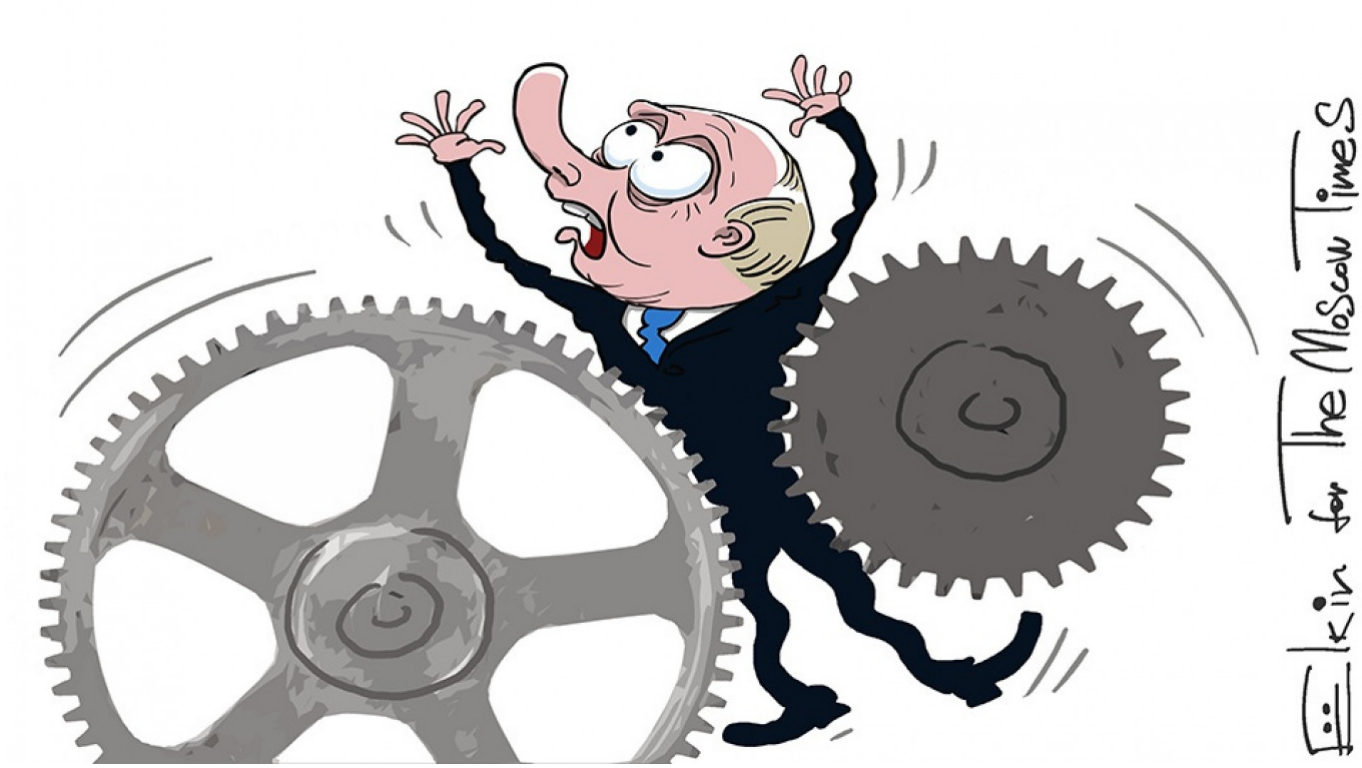
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The Rasps of Putin's Political Machine

The Kremlin's finely tuned gears are rusting over.

By Maxim Trudolyubov

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Sergei Elkin / MT

Anyone who has been watching Kremlin politics for a long time has probably noticed something strange in the air: Russia is too silent.

There doesn't appear to be any grand political game unfolding. The average Russian is too busy just surviving and seems to have lost interest in watching Ukraine-bashing or victorious Syrian exploits on Kremlin-run television networks.

Does this mean we should expect Vladimir Putin to launch some new political adventure this coming year?

The Kremlin's plan for Putin's re-election in 2018 was to make sure he got more votes than in any previous election — including in 2008, when Dmitry Medvedev became president. A moderate communist and a television celebrity with some liberal credentials were employed

to play supporting roles and diversify the ballot. It was a success. The Kremlin got out the vote — no small feat in a totally uncontested election.

Russia's political management was apparently so overwhelmed with creating drama in a decidedly undramatic race that it took all post-election politics for granted. Unpleasant policy stuff like, say, increasing taxes and the retirement age were postponed until after the election. They clearly believed that no harm could be done once the big event was over.

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In fact, it was only after the election that everything began to unravel.

Voters hated the increase of the retirement age. The Kremlin's spy mishaps were highly publicized. Putin's approval rating reached four-year lows. The elections in September went haywire in a number of regions. The Istanbul-based Patriarch of Constantinople decided to heed Ukraine's call to create a local Orthodox church with the center in Kiev, thwarting Moscow's efforts of keeping at least a faith-based authority over Ukraine.

None of these events was fateful in itself.

Spy scandals happen all the time. Ratings go up and down. In the September elections, most regions dutifully played Moscow's game and voted for the candidate endorsed by Putin (just four out of 26 territories that held elections this year didn't cooperate. What are four regions for a country of 80-plus?) And the church issues are no big deal either. In the 21st century, the church does not hold the crowning position it used to.

And yet all of these issues taken together do sound like a rasp produced by a faulty mechanism.

For almost two decades, Vladimir Putin and his inner circle have been driven by a passion to turn their political system into a finely tuned and efficient instrument. They weeded out the unpredictable and the weak. They replaced disloyal officials. They installed competent bureaucrats in place of the incompetent ones. They also harassed, persecuted, prosecuted, jailed and drove into exile those who were too stubborn or out of reach. Political murders in Russia over the past 20 years have never been properly investigated, which is why we will leave them out of the picture for now.

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For years, the Kremlin has been busy filtering out rogue actors — rogue from the Kremlin's point of view. Lawmakers who refused to cooperate were phased out to make room for "expert policymakers" on the Kremlin's payroll. Businessmen were expropriated not because Putin was a communist (by no means), but in the name of national security — the Kremlin's security experts will tell you so. Newspapers which refused to cooperate were stopped not because they were independent but because, in the Kremlin's view, they were funded by adversarial, often foreign, interests — the Kremlin's media experts will tell you so.

The public figures, entrepreneurs and journalists who are no longer present in the political

scene are absent not because of their beliefs — they hold diverse beliefs — but because they stood in the way of experts. The Kremlin has no ideology, at least not in the 20th-century sense of the notion. But the Kremlin does believe in the power of expertise. The security expert makes life safe. The policymaking expert runs domestic politics. And media experts finetune the Kremlin's PR, rather than party, line.

But recently, the Kremlin's machine has become too visible and its screeching too loud. We will hear more of it.

Some in Russia expect Putin to embark on a major political adventure. When caught in similarly dire circumstances in the past, Putin has responded by unleashing a crisis of his own making: A military operation abroad or a major political reshuffle at home. What is he preparing this time? Perhaps a falling out with Japan's Shinzo Abe over the Kuril Islands?

The only element missing in the Kremlin's, and often the pundits', calculations is a living person. Actual humans seem increasingly superfluous to the Kremlin's fine statecraft. The political machine has worked so well in past years that the only challenges the leadership saw were exotic problems. Reaching a certain number of votes in an election was a kind of political sport.

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It is a mistake to think that authoritarian regimes grow organically, all by themselves. Just like democracies, they have to be nurtured and defended. And just like democracies, they can be easily taken for granted by those who benefit from them.

The Russian regime does not look like that of the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban or that of U.S. President Donald Trump.

It looks more like a tired regime, one likely to stir resentment and discontent because it has been around for too long and its leaders have grown too arrogant to listen to the voice of those down below.

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