The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Five Years After Crimea, Russia Has Come Full Circle at Great Cost

The president’s approval rating is once again in decline, and this time he doesn’t have another wildly popular trick hidden up his sleeve.

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February 05, 2019



Kremlin.ru

Vladimir Putin’s approval rating began sliding in January 2019. Having hovered at 66 percent in the last three months of 2018, it fell to 64 percent last month. These figures are not significant in themselves. What's significant is that his rating has not been this low since January 2014, when it stood at 63 percent.

Putin's popularity over the last 10-plus years has been pegged to military campaigns and patriotic hysteria. It peaked at 88 percent in September 2008 immediately after Russia's short war with Georgia (when Putin was officially prime minister), but thereafter it fell slowly but surely, bottoming out at 61 percent in November 2013. Then in 2014, the popular move to annex Crimea saw his rating soar to 86 percent.

This symbolic figure established a new social contract between the authorities and society. In return for absolute political support, the state provided meagre social services propped up by the restored feeling of belonging to a great power.

But in 2017, this contract started to disintegrate. Research headed by Carnegie Moscow Center and the Levada Center showed that the Russian people wanted dramatic change. Consensus had been reached that Russia had become great again. On this backdrop, anti-Western fervor was gradually losing its effectiveness, and people demanded that the government fix the depressing economic reality.

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Following the March 2018 presidential elections, the opposite seemed to happen. There were hikes in VAT and fuel prices, a five-year fall in real incomes, followed by the deeply unpopular move to raise the retirement age. Even Russia's triumphant hosting of the FIFA World Cup didn't work in Putin's favor; it merely reduced anti-Western sentiment among Russians.

In five years, we have thus come full circle. The five years have, however, taken a toll on Russia. The country has seen economic depression, a deluge of repressive legislation, and a sustained anti-Western propaganda campaign.

However, this time it seems that Putin doesn't have another Crimea up his sleeve and his trusted formula is no longer having the desired effect. In 2018, the arrest of Ukrainian sailors off the coast of Crimea and the testing of a new hypersonic glide missile — described by Putin as an "excellent New Year's gift to the nation" — left people cold.

Similarly, recent talks with Japan on the status of the Kuril Islands failed to inspire feelings of national pride.

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Domestically, the defeat of several government-backed candidates in September's regional elections has forced the authorities to reconsider what their electorate actually want. There is clear discontent but the people lack the instruments to communicate their demands and wishes. The normal system of representative democracy has long been dismantled.

As a result, the authorities have been forced to try to come up with their own version of what

people need. Since the end of last year, Kremlin strategists have been trying out new instruments, paying more attention to the social agenda.

The authorities are actively trying to build civil society in its own image, through a system of presidential grants and by encouraging volunteer activity. The big question, however, is whether society will judge these efforts as sincere, or find them to be poor imitations.

Putin is no longer the symbol of the nation he once was. He is a living person who bears responsibility for what is happening in the country as much as any other senior official. With this in mind, it's worth keeping a close eye on his approval rating.

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