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Modern Russia Is Putin Deciding a Park Use Dispute

A protest against building an Orthodox church in the Russian hinterland reveals a lot about the country's power structure.

By Leonid Bershidsky

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The story of an unbuilt church in the Ural Mountains city of Yekaterinburg has all the elements of how Russian society and government work in 2019: angry citizens who think their interests are ignored, regional authorities that ignore them and side instead with the Russian Orthodox Church and its oligarch donors, top-class muscle hired by the oligarchs — and an intervention by President Vladimir Putin, ostensibly on the citizens' side but likely with an outcome that will favor the other party.

Yekaterinburg is a major industrial city of 1.5 million, one of Russia's wealthiest and most important urban centers. In 1930, the Bolsheviks razed the city's main cathedral, dedicated to

St. Catherine — the namesake of Catherine I, the empress and widow of Peter the Great for whom the city was named. Ever since the Soviet Union's collapse, the locals, city authorities and church figures have discussed rebuilding the cathedral, if not at the original site, then elsewhere.

Last year, the city government picked a public park on the bank of the Iset River after what many locals consider a rigged public hearing. Many in the neighborhood would rather have the trees than yet another church. The Yekaterinburg Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church, which includes the city and surrounding towns, already has 312 churches and chapels.

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Nevertheless, the project went ahead, sponsored by two local billionaires: copper tycoons Igor Altushkin and Andrey Kozitsyn. They also received permission for a housing and commercial development next to the new cathedral. This duo and the Orthodox Church have enlisted the help of many prominent locals in promoting the project. Even local rock heroes, known for their protest songs from the last years of the Soviet Union, have spoken up in favor of the cathedral.

But when a metal fence was erected in the park this month to mark the construction site, locals were no longer willing to listen. On May 13, an angry mob tore down the fence and tried to sink it in the river. "I didn't notice the fence! I just pushed it and it fell," an activist posted on Facebook.

The angry locals were chased away hours later by an overwhelming force: mixed martial arts fighters from a fighting academy set up by Altushkin, a fan of the sport. They included an international star, Ivan Shtyrkov, making the altercation news to specialized MMA publications.

Yet hundreds of protesters came back the next day, and the local authorities got serious. Almost 30 of the protesters were detained. On Wednesday, workers reinforced the fence with concrete, and riot police with rubber sticks were sent to guard it — yet the park's defenders returned, and more clashes and dozens of further detentions followed.

Both the violence and the persistence of the protests weren't typical. Russians aren't exactly passive — they demonstrate regularly against unpopular government policies like last year's retirement age increase or, most frequently in recent years, against the worsening waste disposal situation and out-of-control, massive landfills.

But it is rare for people to keep pushing back after both private actors and the authorities show their willingness to use force against them. Besides, the protests are against a church: a symbol of the Putin regime's appeals to Russian history and tradition. That's as alarming to loyalists as the Yekaterinburg residents' stubbornness. So is the interest of opposition figures such as anti-corruption activist Alexey Navalny, who on Thursday published an invective essay against Altushkin, demanding that he stop pretending to be an Orthodox patriot or give up his London mansion.

Although Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, initially dismissed the cathedral

controversy as a matter for the local authorities, it still escalated to the national level. In Russia, this can mean only one thing. On Thursday, the matter fell in the lap of the country's final arbiter of conflicts large and small, Putin himself. Asked about the protests at a regional media forum, he acted as if he'd barely heard of them. "Are those people atheists?" he asked. Then, when the park versus church dilemma was explained to him, the president proposed a compromise:

If these are not professional activists from Moscow who have come to make noise and advertise themselves, but really locals, their opinion can't be ignored. I think a church should unite people not divide them. So on both sides there should be steps to resolve this in the interests of those who live there. There's a simple way to do it: conduct a poll and let the minority submit to the majority.

The Yekaterinburg authorities' reaction was immediate (how could it be otherwise): The mayor ordered construction stopped while the authorities take a representative poll. The protesters celebrated and dispersed.

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That's not the end of the story, though. A recent poll by Sotsium, a local polling organization, already showed that 52% of Yekaterinburg residents are against building the cathedral at the park site. Only 28% percent support it. How the poll proposed by Putin will be conducted is up to the same city authorities that earlier sent in the riot police rather than compromise. And they know what Putin actually wants: After proposing the poll, he suggested that the cathedral be built as planned but that the sponsors plant trees elsewhere in the neighborhood. The local residents still have no control over what happens — only, after the poll, no matter how it's conducted, they can no longer expect help from Moscow.

They probably won't try to topple the fence again — but they'll feel ignored and marginalized, while the billionaires will continue with their development plans, the church will pray for Putin and the city authorities will heave a sigh of relief. That's the normal state of affairs in Putin's Russia today: It doesn't pay to "not notice the fence."

In a recently published book, "Putin v. the People," two of the best-informed Russia experts in Western academia, Samuel Greene of King's College London and Graeme Robertson of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, wrote that Putin's dictatorship isn't so much imposed on the Russian people as supported by many of them, an exercise in "co-construction of authoritarianism." One needs, the authors argued, to talk about "Russia's Putin" as much as about "Putin's Russia."

This equilibrium, they wrote, is strong because there are few incentives for people to switch from it unless other people start to defect from support. Yet, in this strength lies the source of Putin's weakness. The construction of the regime depends upon a social consensus that will one day unravel. And when it does, Russia's own experience suggests it will happen quickly.

Episodes such as the one in Yekaterinburg show that Putin actively seeks popular support; he doesn't fully rely on coercion. But the goals of his regime are often incompatible with

ordinary people's simple interests. The pillars of the regime — the wealthy people willing to fund Putin's traditionalist ideology in exchange for business opportunities, the church that is happy to push the ideology, the enormous police force happy to wield its sticks for those who feed it — care nothing about where those people will go with their baby carriages.

Sleight of hand is an ever-present element in Putin's quest for popular support. But it's hard to fool all the people all the time, and the "defection from support" mentioned by Greene and Robertson is gradually happening. It's just that Russia hasn't passed the point when things will begin to happen quickly.

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