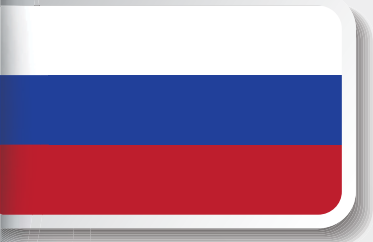


# RUSSIA: AN INCREASINGLY repressive autocracy seeking a place on the UN Human Rights Council

LARA KOVANDOVA



# RUSSIA: AN INCREASINGLY REPRESSIVE AUTOCRACY

## SEEKING A PLACE ON THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

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BY **Lara Kovandova**

**The Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) 2020 cautiously points to Vladimir Putin's forging of an authoritarian-bureaucratic nomenklatura. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have denounced the deteriorating human rights situation in Russia, with freedom of speech and assembly systematically undermined and violated. The recent plebiscite to reform the constitution is the epitome of Mr Putin masquerading the authoritarian regime as a democracy.**



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## Introduction

Vladimir Putin has been in power for the past 20 years. How much longer he will be ruling the country, is uncertain. He first became a president in 2000, after having been a prime minister. After two terms, he was legally obliged to step down. He became a prime minister. In 2012, however, amidst a questionable process which sparked widespread protests, he assumed presidency again.

A repressive leader, forging a cult of personality, constructing a political leadership of his inner circle and securocrats, and marginalising opposition and liberal reformers, Vladimir Putin's crackdown on democratic principles and civil society has continued.

A president who is unable to come to terms with the end of the Soviet legacy, his rule is increasingly resembling that of Stalin. Putting his own spin on the USSR nomenklatura, the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) 2020 cautiously points to Vladimir Putin's forging of an *authoritarian-bureaucratic nomenklatura*. An authoritarian regime in which Putin appoints officials to high ranking positions, in a manner to maintain the Party apparatus.

The novel coronavirus has given him another excuse to tighten his grip over the country and enforce an even more repressive regime, similarly to other authoritarian regimes.

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have denounced the deteriorating human rights situation in Russia, with freedom of speech and assembly systematically undermined and violated. Protests, whether against the regime or over environmental concerns are squashed and politically active non-governmental organisations are suffocated. The democratic front Russia is trying to conserve is crumbling, and Putin's response is to deploy force and coercion.



This reaction, coupled with the feeble state of the economy and the social well-being of the people, battered by the coronavirus, has 'eclipsed national pride' and sparked discontent amongst the people, remarks the Carnegie Moscow Center. As a result, President Putin's approval ratings have consistently fallen, reaching historical lows this year.

The recent plebiscite to reform the constitution is the epitome of Mr Putin masquerading the authoritarian regime as a democracy. Spread out over a week to conceal the risk of the coronavirus, the public vote ended on the 1st of July. The rise of a «Putin-era constitution,», the Carnegie Moscow Center names it, written on Putin's terms, was looming. A critical vote, these constitutional reforms would legalise the resetting of the clock on presidential terms, enabling Putin to stay in power for another 16 years, or until he turns 84.

This component, however, was buried in some 200 people-pleaser reforms that the public was meant to vote on. Anything from more social security, to enshrining a patriotic education and banning same-sex marriage. This large package was purposefully designed in order for everyone to find something to support, and ultimately vote in favour of the changes. The ballot paper was only a yes or no question: either one supported the whole package of reforms, or not. Consequently, the plebiscite to reform the constitution saw an overwhelming majority (nearly 78%) vote in support for the constitutional reforms.

The vote may have appeared democratic, a referendum with authorities assuring that every measure possible was taken to ensure a safe procedure. However, these «safety» procedures included spreading out the vote time over a period of a week, allowing people to vote from home and even online, in some cities. Undermined independent scrutiny, monitoring to prevent fraud was near impossible.

Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, the vote was only for show. The impact of the vote was superficial, given the parliament's approval of the changes, prior to the vote (a parliament which President Putin de facto controls). President Putin was broadcasting a referendum, portraying adhesion to democratic principles, but the vote had no legal premise. Neither did the referendum have a determined threshold to exceed.

Opposition figures hastily denounced the fraud, calling it «not legitimate,» a «rigged, mocked procedure.» Alexei Navalny, a prominent Kremlin critic denounced the referendum as a «big lie.» The Open Russia movement also voiced its concerns, stating



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that «everything about the plebiscite vote is a scam.» But Russia is infamous for silencing opposition and critics.

It is under this repressive, authoritarian regime, suffocating civil society, committing flagrant violations of human rights, silencing opposition and discriminating against portions of its population that Russia is presenting a new candidacy for the United Nations Human Rights Council.

## Russia in the Bertelsmann Stiftung Index: an overview

The Bertelsmann Stiftung Transformation Index (BTI) analyses the transformation of developing and emerging economies over time. It is embedded in three distinct pillars: political, economic, and governance. It analyses the transformation of each category over a given period of time (2006-2020) to depict any important changes, improvements or setbacks in the country's path toward a democratic regime and free market economy, as well as its leadership capability. These in-depth assessments cover 137 countries, which are published every couple of years (this report will concentrate on the 2020 BTI report covering 2017-2019 – prior to the coronavirus outbreak and the novel constitution). Within these three dimensions are 17 subdivisions, including the rule of law for political transformation, levels of socioeconomic integration for economic transformation and consensus building for governance. These subdivisions contain 49 specific, refined questions, or aspects. Indicatively, all of these are ranked on a scale out of 10, 1 representing the poorest performance and 10 being best.

Russia has had a very low performance since the beginning of the Index, which is not surprising. Issues ranging from holding political prisoners, conducting crackdowns on peaceful protests, undermining elections, to the difficult realities of an unsustainable economic model, with properties of a rentier state, and escalation of international conflicts and its repercussions, have caused Russia's low scores across all three categories: political transformation, economic transformation and governance index.

The BTI's understanding of democracy is overarching. It includes, among other factors, the rule of law and the separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers with checks and balances. The political transformation measures the extent to which a democratic order is consolidated, incorporating representation and political culture. Russia, in its democratic status, scores 4.4; and classifies as a *moderate autocracy*.



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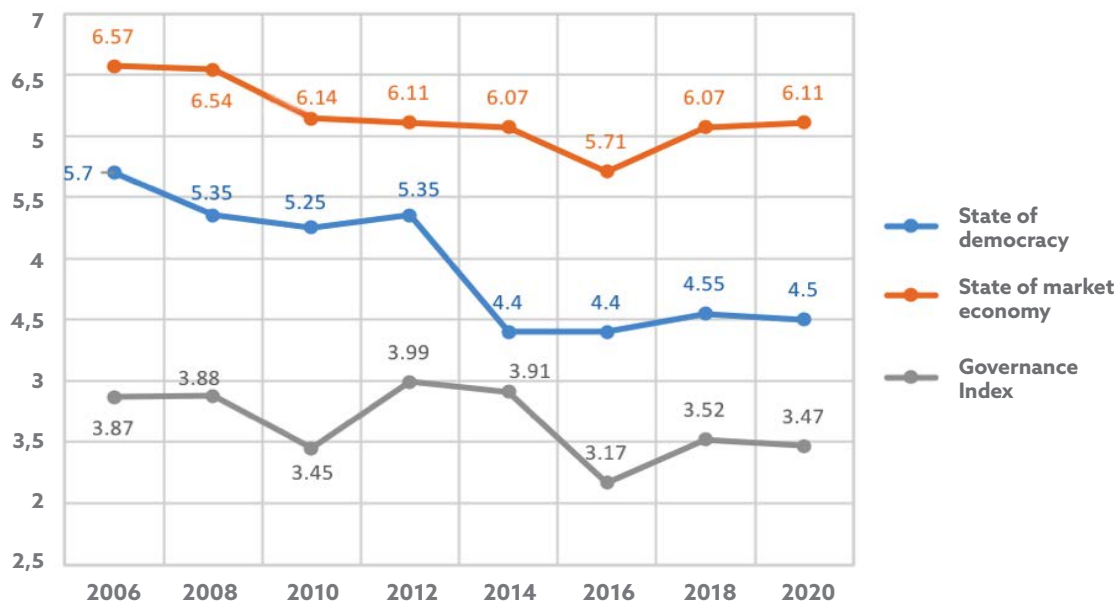


Russia has been considered an autocracy since 2012, with a sudden drop from 5.35 to 4.4 in the political status index, coinciding with Putin's (second) rise to power as a president. President Putin's ever-increasing consolidation of power, and repressive actions against opposition has kept the level of the political transformation steadily low throughout the years.

The underlying concept of market economy in the BTI is one which is pro market, but also socially democratic. It includes the principles of social justice, welfare regime and sustainability. Development, for the BTI, goes beyond mere economic growth - it encompasses the process of overcoming poverty whilst extending freedoms to the greatest strata of the population possible. In this category, Russia scores a 6.11. A *limited* economic transformation marked by the lingering effects of the 2008 economic crisis, exacerbated by further complications in 2014 with international sanctions. Only in 2017 did Russia enjoy a slight recovery in its economy, but it is soon stalled, and now threatens to plunge again, as a result of falling oil prices, structural faults and economic sanctions from abroad.

ONLY IN 2017 DID RUSSIA ENJOY A SLIGHT RECOVERY IN ITS ECONOMY, BUT IT IS SOON STALLED, AND NOW THREATENS TO PLUNGE AGAIN, AS A RESULT OF FALLING OIL PRICES, STRUCTURAL FAULTS AND ECONOMIC SANCTIONS FROM ABROAD.

RUSSIA'S PERFORMANCE IN THE BERTELSMANN TRANSFORMATION INDEX (BTI)  
2006-2020





The governance index relates to aspects of performance, capacity and accountability of political leadership. Russia has a score of 3.47, which represents a weak performance and suggests inefficiency amongst the executive branch, a failure of steering capability and ineffective policy implementation. This is explained by factors such as the sheer scale of the Russian country, and the widespread corruption which undermines effective administration and organisation. The governance index has shown little change in the period under review, consistently ranked between 3 and 4 on the BTI scale.

## Political Transformation

Categorised as a moderate autocracy, Russia is struggling with a repressive president, curtailing any form of opposition and social engagement.

When Putin assumed presidency after Boris Yeltsin in 2000, it coincided with a rise in oil and other raw material prices. A surge in prices translated to economic growth, which in turn generated widespread, sustained, support for Putin. His rule contrasted with the humiliating introduction of democracy in the catastrophic 1990s. Putin's «sovereign democracy» was seen as a more stable, prosperous and favourable alternative. The Russian people came to appreciate stability as an economic anchor, at the expense of democratic principles such as democratic elections, accountability, and civil rights.

After two terms in office he stepped down to prime minister, but hand-picked a successor: Dmitry Medvedev. Dmitry Medvedev significantly opened up the economy. Civil engagement was high, and think tanks were able to present new ideas for the future of Russia. In 2012, however, after effectively swapping places with Medvedev, Vladimir Putin became president again. Mass protests broke out in major cities, but were met with repression and coercion.

The crushing of these protests exemplifies the meaningless of rights of association and assembly, albeit constitutionally guaranteed. This is reflected in the BTI's score of 3. Demonstrations are swiftly dissolved, especially when unauthorised. The BTI 2020 points out that legislation has become increasingly more restrictive over the years. Alarmed international actors, the Council of Europe Venice Commission has already voiced concern, accusing Russia of violating European standards.



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The BTI highlights Putin's continued crackdown on democratic principles. He did away with free and fair elections (now scoring 4 on the BTI index), effectively eliminating any possibility for credible opposition. Opposition candidates and parties are either faced with severe restrictions impeding on registration, or imprisonment. Protests are repressed, and opposition demonstrations and assemblies are banned. Elections are commonly rigged, lacking independent scrutiny and monitoring. The electoral system itself strongly favours the president and his party, *United Russia*. Even campaigns are a product of state propaganda, as it directly controls the most influential media outlets; «90% of the information segment of the country and forming public opinion, have been under the very strict control of state organs» according to the Russian Ombudsman for Human Rights.

The BTI also draws attention to the fact that the President wishes to portray Russian institutions as democratic, but with the controlled nature of Russia's party system, no credible alternative is presented to the public and elections are invariably rigged. This system can be characterised as *electoral authoritarianism*: one which is fundamentally autocratic, but which permits a shallow existence of democratic institutions.

Freedom of expression, supposedly enshrined in the constitution too, means very little in Russia. Independent, critical journalists and media face heavy pressure from the state, as well as harassment and sanctions for their reporting. Reporters Without Borders ranked Russia 147th out of 168 countries in the World Press Freedom Index. Worryingly, assaults and violent attacks directed at journalists, sometimes fatal, are not uncommon. Although there is no evidence to suggest the state is responsible for these attacks, it is, nevertheless, unable or even unwilling, to protect journalists and hold anyone accountable for their crimes.

The hollowing of freedoms of association and of speech extends to politically active non-governmental organisations who are forced to register as «foreign agents.» This not only cuts their foreign funding (which they often depend on) but it subjects them to the highest level of state scrutiny - preventing them from working efficiently. Civil society, as a result, is very weak. Moreover, a new law adopted in 2015 introduced the category of «undesirable organisations» which prohibits international NGOs. The US Agency for International Development, UNICEF and the Ford Foundation, among other, have been forced to leave the country.

The BTI underscores the weakened rule of law. The system of checks and balances faces serious shortcomings among the executives. In Russia's system, the president

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has complete control of the judiciary, and no law can be adopted without his approval (the independent judiciary as such, only scores a 4 on the BTI scale). The state also regularly interferes in court proceedings and the Constitutional Court can overrule decisions of the international courts, if they are deemed unconstitutional.

As such, although basic administration (relating to institutions with functioning state bodies of justice, law enforcement and the means of implementing policies) exists throughout the country (and scores a 7 on the scale), the BTI notes that these are often subverted as a result of heavy bureaucratisation and corruption. This results in weak administrative performance.

With a weak administrative performance accountability and transparency is undermined. As a result, the harassment and discrimination against non-Russian ethnic groups and minorities is widespread, and perpetrators enjoy impunity. Notably, Human Rights Watch denounced minority and LGBT+ communities' systematic harassment and discrimination in its 2018 report urging the Russian government to take action.

Putin is further centralising power and the political leadership is enjoying a strengthening of its political power, at the expense of civil and human rights. Russian people value 'stability' over democratic principles, a direct result of the failed promise of prosperity and democracy after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. Exploiting state propaganda to fuel a nationalist sentiment amongst the people, Mr Putin also consistently portrays the West as a threat to Russia –reinforcing scepticism of the west and their modern values, whilst earning support for his own, restrictive regime.



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## **Economic Transformation**

The economic transformation in Russia is undermined by an umbrella of issues. The BTI 2020 notes continues widespread corruption seeping into every aspect of society which not only presents problems with administrative tasks and resource allocation, but also policy implementation. Structural faults and the physical vastness of the region present infrastructural challenges. The overreliance on oil and gas underscores the lack of diversification of the Russian economy, which inevitably renders it vulnerable to external conditions out of Russia's control. Additionally, growing tensions with the West is triggering international economic sanctions, preventing Russia from reaching desired prosperity levels.



At the back of 2014, the mean wage fell by 40% as a result of the devaluation of the ruble. The economic conditions in Russia have always been precarious, as a result of a high dependency on oil (consisting of 69% of its GDP). The high dependency on raw materials, especially oil and gas, makes Russia very vulnerable to the volatility of the international market prices, proving disastrous for its economy when the oil prices fall, as experienced in 2014.

Restricted economic sources, coupled with structural faults and economic sanctions by the European Union and the United States after Russia's annexation of Crimea which caused an international scandal and reprisal, is severely limiting Russia's economic growth. The economic outlook was finally taking a favourable turn in 2017, when Russia witnessed a positive, albeit modest growth (1.5%).

As indicates the BTI, the sheer size in landmass characteristic of Russia poses an inherent obstacle. With underdeveloped infrastructure, some rural areas face scarcity of resources, where basic necessities are not guaranteed. A lack of funding has translated into a decline in the quality of available resources, whilst the infrastructural challenges remain to be tackled. In contrast, Russia's big cities, such as Moscow and St. Petersburg, enjoy a lush quality of life, comparable to that of European countries' middle-class.

Market-based competition is institutionally guaranteed, foreign trade has been liberalised, and Russia finally joined the WTO in 2012. The liberalisation of foreign trade scores an 8 on the BTI scale. However, although fundamental principles of a market economy are not rejected by Russia's key political actors, the elite consensus developed under Mr Putin is oriented towards a limited market economy.

Moreover, foreign investments remain far below levels needed to satisfy the Russian economy, a result of unfavourable conditions for businesses. Private property can be seized by the state if the sector is deemed «strategic.» Consequently, the state has systematically reduced the share of private ownership to the extent of now controlling 71% of the economy, according to the IMF. The share of small and medium business has been continuously crushed, and now represents a mere 16%.

The social security system is relatively well developed in Russia, scoring a 6 on the BTI scale. However, it does not benefit all strata of the population, no less with a large share of the population working in the shadow economy (30% of GDP according to the IMF and 20% according to Russian figures). Red tape and widespread corruption also hinders its accessibility, efficiency and availability. The large rate of the informal sector



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may be a result of the lack of equality of opportunity. Access to opportunity varies from region to region and discriminates against non-Russian ethnic groups, barring a section of the population from gaining employment. Discrimination is apparent not only on the job market, but also in the education system which further reiterates the vicious cycle. This social exclusion is particularly pronounced in the North Caucasus, where living standards and wages are significantly lower than the national average and a quarter of the population is unemployed. Another particularly discriminated community is the LGBT+ community, which is also consistently harassed.

In terms of ecological concerns, despite the legacy of environmental damage in the Soviet era, they remain entirely subordinate to growth efforts in Russia, expressed in the BTI 2020. Conservation organisations have repeatedly stated that they lack support from the Kremlin.

Hope for a more ecologically-conscious country seemed to materialise on a few occasions. In 2012, President Medvedev issued a decree to improve Russia's environmental policy until 2030. In January 2016, President Putin signed an executive order to «preserve biodiversity» and ensure «environmental security.» Following this, the year 2017 was named the «Year of the Environment.»

However, these measures were in vain, lacking sustained and committed efforts to tackling environmental issues in Russia. With a score of 4 on environmental policy, the BTI highlights that Vladimir Putin has shown a reluctance to reduce carbon emissions, even as one of the signatories of the Paris Climate Agreement, and has carried out very little action in order to make Russia more environmentally sustainable.

Russia's focus on education has grown (scoring a 6 on the 2020 BTI scale), declared a top priority, along with a commitment of increased investment. Putin intends on raising the quality of Russian institutions, and by joining the Bologna Process, Putin aims to level his institutions to European standards. So far, only a handful of institutions (mainly in St. Petersburg and Moscow) reach a similar standard, but with continued effort and funding, Times Higher Education (THE) registered an improvement in the international standing of Russia's leading universities in 2016.



**RUSSIA'S FOCUS ON EDUCATION HAS GROWN (SCORING A 6 ON THE 2020 BTI SCALE), DECLARED A TOP PRIORITY, ALONG WITH A COMMITMENT OF INCREASED INVESTMENT.**



## Governance Index

According to the BTI, Russia's structural constraints on governance are moderate, and socioeconomic development is relatively high. The challenges Russia faces relate to infrastructural issues, repression, corruption (affecting even the judiciary branch), and the rise of a novel nomenklatura system.

Putin's unconcealed admiration for Stalin and his rule is making its way into his own regime, forging an authoritarian-bureaucratic nomenklatura. Putin is centralising the role of the president and that of his inner circle, whilst appointing officials to influential positions and making a greater use of *siloviki*, or securocrats (former law enforcement or army officials), who are now politicians; a scenario reminiscent of the Soviet era.

In light of this increasing consolidation of power, building a solid foundation for the development of a democracy is evidently not a priority for President Putin, and whilst adherence to democratic principles remains part of the rhetoric of President Putin, consensus amongst the elite is achieved on the grounds of 'stability.' This is implicitly understood as the conservation of the current power structure of political control.

Russia's history has for a long time been a repressive one. The terror regime of Joseph Stalin during the Soviet era followed by the repressive rule of Vladimir Putin has mobilised people and organisations to stand up against such suffocating environments. Independent NGOs were born in Russia in the 1980s, mushroomed in the 1990s and have continuously grown since. However, their political impact is limited (and civil society participation only scores a 3 on the BTI index) as any criticism against Vladimir Putin has been met with repression and state pressure.

Civil society has nonetheless not disintegrated, and although often repressed, the protests and city demonstrations observed over the last decade point to cracks in the system. The unofficial social contract between the state and society, one where the state provides social support in exchange for society to stay out of politics, is weakening. Independent decision-makers, advisory bodies and civil society organisations have been increasingly brought under the Kremlin's control. The BTI notes that consolidation of power and pressure tactics have increasingly been used in an attempt to maintain stability and suppress uprisings.



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The economy's collapse in the 1990s following the dissolution of the USSR is the driving factor behind Putin's hunger for economic growth and increased economic presence on the international platform. This has become even more evident in 2018 following the presidential elections, when Putin issued the May Decree highlighting his main goal of bringing Russia to the top five global economies while maintaining GDP growth above the global average.

In order to achieve this, key, modernising reforms must be implemented. But the BTI gives a score as low as 4 for policy implementation. The inefficiency with which policy is implemented –although strategically thought out– is a result of administration's deficient capacity, where corruption and a lack of resources are undermining large-scale, necessary projects.

According to the BTI, Russia's weak administrative capacity compounded by Russia's extensive landmass causes major infrastructural challenges, leaving rural areas poorly managed. The results are secluded, remote rural areas, lacking effective transportation linking them to the densely populated main cities (concentration in these cities is high due to their climate-friendly characteristic). Rich in natural resources but cut off from the rest of the country and international markets, the lack of high-speed transcontinental rail links and a highway system makes the transportation of goods an expensive endeavour.

The failure of modernisation projects and the limitations these bring with regards to the economy's prosperity, is an issue recognised by both Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev, but Russia can only handle so much modernisation under an authoritarian rule. Too much progress may threaten the stability of the country, as witnessed twice in the 20th century.

International cooperation is not of high interest to Russian authorities, evidenced by the annexation of Crimea, causing relations with the EU and the United States to crumble. However, considering Russia wants to be a global partner and gain greater international prominence, Moscow is interested in some cooperation –when it suits it and can reap some immediate benefits. It is entirely interest-based. The Eurasian Economic Union sprung for this interest-based desire for cooperation, with four former Soviet republics. International cooperation with the west –with an ulterior motive of rising to a global superpower, is undermined by Russia's questionable leadership and actions. Its strong stance on independence and domestic policy, which includes human rights issues, to be sheltered from foreign interference results in low compliance with international standards. Systematic breaches of human rights standards, escalation of



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conflicts in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, as well as a distaste for long-term, strategic cooperation is creating a hostile political environment comparable to the Cold War, unfavourable to relationship building. And finally, Russia is still clinging on to the legacy of the Soviet rule. It still believes the countries of the former union represent Moscow's rightful sphere of influence, which is troubling the international community.

## Conclusion

During the period under review Russia's autocratic transformation continued. The pursuit of stability justifies the repressive, centralised rule of President Putin, whilst his chosen political elite enjoys greater political power. The political system he has forged draws on aspects of Stalin's rule, subsequently giving way to an authoritarian-bureaucratic nomenklatura.

Cracks in the system are becoming apparent and discontent has made its presence felt, but any criticism of the regime is met with repression. Freedom of speech and assembly is restricted, with journalists silenced and protests crushed. Civil and human rights continue to be ignored with prevailing discrimination against non-Russian ethnic groups and LGBT+ communities. Human rights activists and politically active organisations are marginalised. The state dominates control over the majority of media outlets, feeding nationalistic ideals to the people and fuelling scepticism over Western principles.

As such, Vladimir Putin's Russia, one of the world's worst human rights abusers, demonstrating no willingness to abide by the international human rights standards, is presenting its candidacy once again to the UN Human Rights Council for the 2021-2023 period. Russia's economic model is unsustainable. A heavy dependency on the export of raw materials, notably oil, has made it vulnerable to economic downturns when the price of oil falls. The superficial adherence to democratic institutions and the violations of international rules and norms has not only strained international relations, but has caused economic sanctions, negatively affecting Russia's political and economic scene.

Russia finds itself at a political and economic impasse. The regime is showing signs of instability and the economic model is proving to be unsustainable. At the same time, tensions with the west are increasing and undermining Russia's presence and importance on the international platform.




CADAL is a private, non-profit, non-partisan foundation, whose mission is to promote human rights and international democratic solidarity.

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