

EARTH IS CRACKING; SKY IS BURNING.

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Introduction

Often, predictions prove to be just predictions. But sometimes they become reality. It strongly appears as if the predication in the '*Cracks and fault lines*' article falls into the second category: Russia's population reached a dead end and the average Russian cannot do much besides resisting in order to take control and plot a new course for the Russian ship. It seems that the Russian Bear, trained by Putin, is about to throw in the towel.

Turning tolls

Within and outside the Russian Federation (RF), the tolls keep turning. The Kremlin no longer seems able to control the speed and direction of these domestic tolls due to the deteriorating economy and Putin's costly and extravagant foreign adventures. The people grumble and search for ways to survive.

The grumbling of the most important toll – the economy – is muffled because of reducing speed and a tilting axis. The moment this toll falls over is getting closer, according to *Rosstat*,¹ the Russian Federal State Statistics Service. The combination of dropping oil and gas prices and Western sanctions are obviously thought to be the most important cause, which has a large element of truth. Given the growing American independence of foreign fossil fuel and the increasing search for alternative energy in the Western World, gas and oil prices will continue to drop and effect the content of the Russian treasury. Even an OPEC decision to limit the daily oil production for a lengthy period, will not have a positive effect on Russian households. Policymakers in the Kremlin, supported by fake news²media continuously try to bury that gloomy perspective for the Russian citizen.

The long arm of West-oriented websites and blogs extend to inside the RF and parts of the population finally realise that foreign adventures drives unemployment and seriously affects their daily food supply. Unemployment gradually rises. With the exception of Moscow (8%), unemployment has risen to above 40% in most cities in the Eastern part of the RF that only have one branch of military related industry.³ In the building sector, massive salary decreases are likely to happen as well. Measured by the fact that a quarter of the unemployed are already a year without jobs, the prospects for the affected Russian families are catastrophic.

Dissatisfaction fills the street.

Now that *Rosstatt* finally acknowledges that this important domestic toll continues even outside the Kremlin's reach, and that websites and blogs force the state-owned media to inform citizens about approaching, the genie seems to have been let out of the bottle.



Joeri Michajlov in his Volvo. The Three Wise Monkeys on the poster represent the big state-owned broadcasting stations (Rossija 24, Channel One, NTV) that ignore the protest. Beneath it says "Independent Russian media?". On the banner: "No to Platon" © Arthur Bondar

Truckers in particular took the initiative here. Because of the recently introduced toll tax PLATO, truckers need to hand in 50% of their income to fill in gaps of the government. No wonder they disagree and demand that the new PLATO law is lifted immediately. Also, they demand the abolishment of the – as the Kremlin calls it – traffic tax, ending extortion and corruption when weighing the truck and cargo, better working conditions and another method to determine fuel tax.



Foto: *Euromaidan press .com*

The way Medvedev responded shows that he underestimates the seriousness of the truckers and the power of their actions. On the one hand, he announced that the new PLATO tax system will be applied to long distance bus companies as well; on the other hand he tries to marginalise the truckers' demands by not giving publicity to their strikes. With that, he intensified the truckers' anger as well as that of bus drivers. Protests, demonstrations and strikes are spreading unchecked.

In Kazan, a new interregional movement of truckers founded a central check-in to coordinate the fight against the PLATO tax system. The majority of the population of Volgograd supports the truckers' strike, as do the *Buryats*, a local population in the Russian Far East. In Novgorod Veliki, truckers started to protest to reinforce their demands. Oryol has seen a sharp rise in the numbers of strikers. In Kurgan, the official State representatives entered into conversation with the striking truckers. The President of Dagestan was forced to agree to an interview with a local television channel and attempted to justify the PLATO tax system.

The truckers also set in motion other occupational groups. Scientist of the famous Pulkovo astronomical observatory⁴ undertook action to prevent the looming closure of their facility. In Novosibirsk, a large group of citizens protested against the rise of the local gas, water and electricity rates, and Samara's pensioners protested against the reduction of their pensions. In Moscow, citizens demonstrated the disregard of the commemoration of Chernobyl (1984). Teachers raised their concerns with the Ministry of Education about intolerable working conditions. And students demonstrated in Saint Petersburg against a possible closing of their university.

The decision of the Moscow council to dispossess and demolish large numbers of *Krutshoby* apartment buildings⁵ has sparked unrest in Moscow. The average Russian believes that this decision enriches the Putin-elite at the expense of the "common man". This common man became owner of some real estate at the beginning of the nineties and the above-mentioned decision and resulting expropriate procedures force him to hand over the apartment he renovated with his own money to corrupt estate agents. These expropriations gravely damaged the relation between the mayor (and thus the President) and the citizens.

The massive demonstrations on April 29th in various parts of the RF, and especially the slogans on the banners, confirm that the common man and woman are at the end of their patience. Tens of thousands were initially mobilized to demonstrate corruption, however, texts on the banners showed an underlying message: they requested an answer to why the Kremlin spends enormous sums of money on the military while citizens have to tighten their belts more and more.



Demolishing of the apartmentblocks. (Foto: Image: Vas_Nick via Panoramio)

The riot police forcefully tried to remove banners with the slogan "Putin: enough is enough!". The text also underlined the resistance to Putin's re-election in 2018. Thousands of demonstrators were arrested and more than a thousand were taken to court, amongst which the leader of the activists: Alexei Navalny. *Levada Centrum*, an independent research institute, states that Putin's popularity had dropped to under 50%, the amount needed to avoid the second round of the elections. Only 48% of the electorate would vote in favour of Putin's party⁶.

Islamic extremists and Muslims have their own tolls

The unrest is not restricted to demonstrations of concerned citizens with banners on the streets of cities in the RF. Neighbouring states are becoming bigger sources of Islamic resistance, coupled with the power struggle between al-Qaida and ISIS in Dagestan and Ingushetia. The increasing desire of Kadirov to found an independent Chechen Islamic Republic can be seen in the introduction of polygamy and the dismantling of illegal weapon and ammunition workshops in Grozny. In those Caucasus states, the Russian legislation is repeatedly evaded in favour of *sharia* decisions.

The fear that Islamic extremism will go beyond the borders of the Central Asian states and discharge its destructive powers in the cradle of Russian civilization, is growing. Also, the attempts to realise a virtual connection from Afghanistan and the Caucasus from a by ISIS controlled Wahhabistic Caucasian and Khorasan emirate, are becoming a more ominous possibility.

Earth Cracks and Heaven Fades.

Vladimir promised the citizens of the RF that their prosperity level would raise to a level similar to that of a citizen of an average European Union Member State. Higher than that of e.g. a Portuguese. However, the RF population needs to prepare for a further economic decline and ditto prosperity due to Vladimir's quirks and the RF's dark economic outlooks. Economy-wise, a place between Mexico and Bulgaria is more realistic than one between Greece and Ireland.⁷

This economic drought will crack the Russian soil, a great amount of industries will disappear into these fissures and the population will be confronted with an ever setting sun. Gazing into the darkness, searching for rays of light and listening to the fading out of the humming of domestic tolls and the growing humming of foreign tolls will become their ultimate challenge.

¹ Source: "Comments about the state and business", prepared by the Institute Development Centre Higher School of Economics.

² Concerning freedom of press, Russia is ranking 147th, just below Somalia.

³ Lipetsk (47.1%), Karachayevo Tsjerkessia (57.1%), Tuva (53.3%) and in Ingushetia (66.78%).

⁴ The Centre Astronomical Observatory of the Russian Academy of Sciences at Pulkovo.

⁵ Apartment buildings built in the years between 1950 and 1960, and named after Secretary General of the Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev.

⁶ April 2015, 62%; January 2016, 53%

⁷ [facebook.com/ppryanikov/posts/1504202479624806?pnref=story.unseen-section](https://www.facebook.com/ppryanikov/posts/1504202479624806?pnref=story.unseen-section)