

War and peace

Despite its soft-power credentials, there are many factors that are hindering Russia's progress – not least its relations with the West. But is maintaining the status quo at home appealing to ordinary citizens who remember the political and economic turmoil of the past?

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Illustration *Giacomo Gambineri*

In a throwback to the Soviet era, president Vladimir Putin has effectively reinstated one-party rule and defanged the judiciary and much of the media; during his tenure broadcasters and editors of independent newspapers have been bullied and ousted. Going tit for tat with the US (which has accused Russia of trying to influence elections), foreign media outlets and NGOs must declare themselves “foreign agents”, meaning curbed freedoms and red tape.

Meanwhile, the Orthodox Church has filled the ideological void left by the fall of Communism. Religious activists deface exhibitions deemed profane, while church and state-sponsored homophobia is rife. The rise of conservative nationalism is symptomatic of a country with shaky living standards, political oppression and a preoccupation with its position on the world stage.

That said, Putin has presided over an economic revival. Thanks to the once-strong petrodollar, many Russians have been lifted out of poverty and given the chance to travel and study abroad. But the country's over-reliance on oil prices has its cost: following a drop in value, Russia's coffers are being depleted. The cost of living is also rising due to counter-sanctions implemented by Putin following those imposed by the West after Russia's annexation of Crimea.

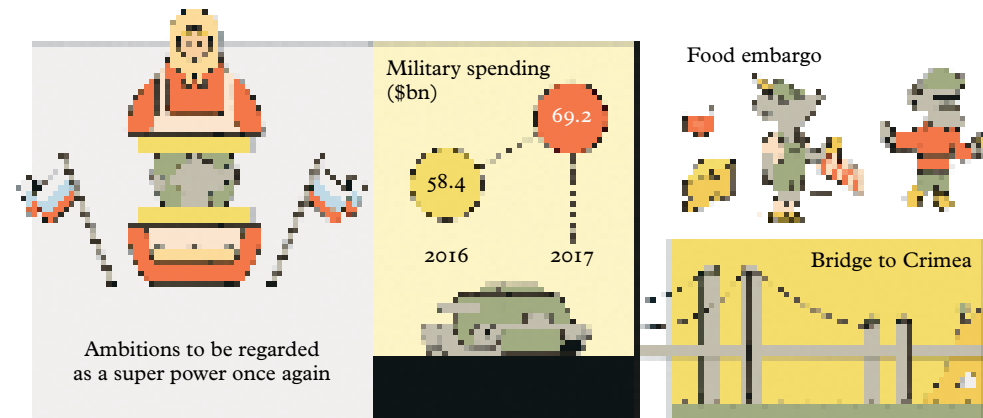
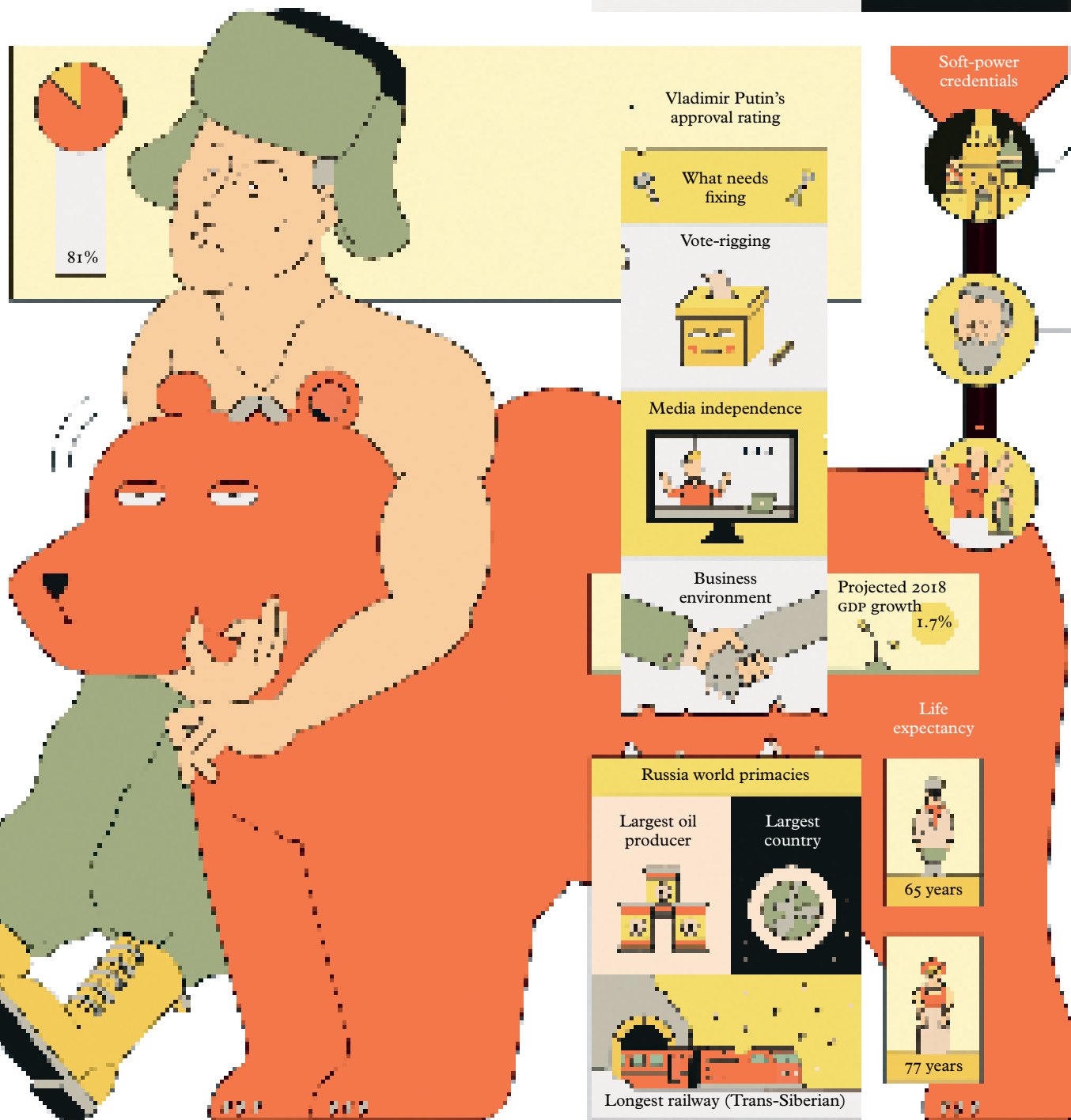
So will presidential elections on 18 March have Putin losing sleep? Unlikely. His United Russia party dominates the Duma, Russia's parliament. Candidate Ksenia Sobchak is hardly a threat (she is the daughter of Putin's mentor), while charges of embezzlement levelled at the charismatic anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny have prevented him from standing.

Whether another six years of Putin is a good thing depends on who you ask. Many Russians remember the volatility of the 1990s and value stability. But young urbanites are unhappy with the status quo and becoming increasingly vocal about the unfair distribution of wealth and the curtailment of political freedoms. — (M)

The leader's performance
Putin's approval ratings remain high – 81 per cent – and most Russians feel that he's made the country one they can be proud of again. However, there has been frustration over the intervention in Ukraine and worsening relations with the US and EU.

Foreign policy
Russia's boldness on the world stage is symbolic of its ambition to once again be regarded as a super power. In response to what it sees as an encroachment by the West, Russia has sponsored separatists in eastern Ukraine and bolstered its armed presence near the Baltic countries. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 was a move to safeguard Russia's fleet in the Black Sea, as well as a popular measure with ordinary Russians. The Kremlin's support of Bashar al-Assad in Syria hasn't won it any friends and, despite Putin backing Donald Trump, US sanctions against Russia remain.

The economy
The double whammy of western sanctions and the drop in oil revenues in 2014 was keenly felt and Russia is just emerging from a recession. Private consumption is fuelling some economic growth but it's predicted to be a sluggish recovery.



Soft-power credentials
Tourism: Moscow's grand Red Square and the splendour of St Petersburg's baroque palaces continue to draw visitors from abroad, while the Trans-Siberian railway is a favourite with intrepid travellers. Russia has 28 Unesco World Heritage sites and crosses 11 time zones – and travelling off the beaten track is becoming easier.
Literature: From Tolstoy's epics *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace* to Dostoyevsky's existentialist prose, the Russian literary canon is a firm fixture on global reading lists. Many of the classics have been adapted for film and stage.
Sport: In its glory days the Soviet Union regularly topped the Olympic medal tables. But Russia's image has been tarnished by recent doping scandals and critics have accused Russia of paying Fifa to host the World Cup in Moscow later this year.

What needs fixing
Business: Russia lacks the investment and technology to make its economy dynamic. It must open its doors to more foreign companies.
Media: Independent media has been the victim of mounting pressure from the government and some broadcast licences have been revoked. Journalists refusing to toe the line have been forced to resign or have been intimidated and, in some cases, have even died under suspicious circumstances.
Voting: Rigging the ballot box is the norm and there is a consensus that elections are routinely fixed. Putin will pull the strings until more stringent checks are introduced.

Food: Following sanctions imposed by the US and Europe, Russia banned food and agricultural imports. This led to a hike in food prices but also to the rise of small farmsteads and a new appreciation for regional delicacies. Regional producers of vegetables and cheese are benefiting the most: more than 70 per cent of cheese sold in the country comes from Russian businesses.
Bridge to Crimea: Russia is building a 19km bridge to link it with Crimea; this will develop infrastructure in the annexed peninsula and also reveals the Kremlin's desire to retain power there. As well as making it easier for Crimean produce to be sold in mainland Russia, the bridge should also encourage Russian tourists to go on holiday there.

Expert opinion
“Putin has placed the main TV channels in the hands of Kremlin-friendly oligarchs but he doesn't have the monopoly on information. The fact that some independent news outlets remain functions as a safety valve – it gives liberals a chance to blow off steam.”
Luke Harding
Journalist and author of 'Collusion: Secret Meetings, Dirty Money, and How Russia Helped Donald Trump Win'

“It suits Putin and his people to have a confrontation with the West. They can demonstrate that there are countries that have hostile intentions towards Russia, which helps to keep the regime in power.”
John Lough
Associate fellow of the Russia and Eurasia programme at Chatham House

“Things aren't great but they're not dire either. As long as Putin can deliver stability there won't be many major protests. People aren't as worried about the freedom of the press as they are about their wages.”
Dr Alex Pravda
Emeritus Fellow at St Antony's College, Oxford

Monocle comment: Though Russia has worked to regain its super-power standing via its intervention in Syria, the nation's soft-power potency has taken a hit. **Grade: D**