

► beeps up the State Council, an advisory body he set up in 2000 and which includes regional governors as well as the speakers of the Duma and the upper chamber of parliament. Mr Putin now proposes giving it executive powers. He also said he would extend the powers of regional governors. An empowered State Council, with Mr Putin as its head, could resemble a Soviet-era Central Committee of the Communist Party, where regional first secretaries were both powerful and loyal to the general secretary. To seal Russia off from the world, a revised constitution would also reduce the sway of international court rulings and conventions over Russian law.

Mr Putin's plan demonstrates his personal power, but the manner and the timing of his announcement hint at underlying vulnerabilities. Last summer's protests in Moscow were sparked by the Kremlin's refusal to register any independent candidates for local elections. Mr Navalny inflicted hefty losses on the ruling party in the capital by urging his supporters to vote tactically against it. Mr Putin's popularity ratings have been steadily sliding.

This may explain his haste in announcing the changes to the constitution. Parliamentary elections are due next year, and the fear of more street protests and political losses mean the Kremlin would rather lock in its changes under the current Duma. Still, Russia is far from safe from upheaval. Mr Putin may continue to rule in some form or other after 2024, but he cannot extinguish the feelings of injustice and discontent that make it so dangerous for him ever to leave the presidency. ■

Milan thrives while Italy stagnates

The angel of the north

MILAN

Italy's second city shows up the rest of the country

MARIATERESA GIUSSANI lives in Segre, 28km (17 miles) outside Milan, and drives to work in the central fashion district where the company she owns, which markets school uniforms, has its offices. "Ten years ago I would leave at 7.15am to avoid the traffic," she says. "Now, I have to be out by 6.15am. If I leave ten minutes later, it's nose-to-tail all the way."

Ms Giussani's altered morning schedule is among the myriad side effects of a boom that has set Milan apart from the rest of Italy, still struggling to recover from the financial crisis of a decade ago, and at best plodding along on the edge of recession.

"The city is on an enormous upswing," says James Bradburne, the Canadian-born

director of Milan's most renowned art museum, the Pinacoteca di Brera. Between 2014 and 2018, according to the regional bosses' federation, Assolombardo, Milan's output grew by 9.7%—more than twice the national rate. Property prices have leapt. Stories abound of out-of-towners paying €400 (\$446) a week to rent a single room, residents offered 50% more than they paid for properties bought four years earlier and luxury-goods firms paying €1m a year or more for an outlet in the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, which links La Scala theatre to the cathedral square.

Central Milan exudes a mix of ostentatious wealth and sophisticated design. And not just the centre: Porta Genova, a once-rundown quarter, today hosts an accountancy multinational, Deloitte; a fashion house, Armani; and a museum of world cultures in a converted factory with a restaurant that boasts three Michelin stars. New skyscrapers dot the skyline and the prosperity they reflect has coincided with a cultural revival. Mr Bradburne has revitalised the Brera with an innovative range of programmes, aimed at everyone from children to Alzheimer's sufferers.

What happened? Most Milanese cite the catalytic effects of hosting the 2015 World Expo. Giuseppe Sala, a businessman, was put in charge of the project and is widely credited with its success. Now the city's centre-left mayor, he modestly attributes much of Milan's progress to property developments launched under a centre-right predecessor, Gabriele Albertini. But, he says, Expo did play an important role: it restored to the Milanese a sense of pride in their city, long dismissed as grey, architecturally and figuratively. "And it showed off its strong points to the world." Tourism has exploded. The annual number of visitors to Milan has soared from 6m to more than 10m since the Expo.

The mayor acknowledges that what some are calling the Milanese miracle has generated problems. The biggest, he thinks, is environmental. He has banned the most polluting vehicles from 70% of the city, offered incentives for the replacement of boilers and plans to make the city's entire bus fleet electric. The boom has also created a division between flashily rich districts and poor ones: Pope Francis pointedly made his first stop in Milan a deprived area with a big immigrant population. Mr Sala says investors have already committed a further €12bn-13bn to property development in the city, and that much of it will go to the periphery and to providing reasonably priced accommodation.

Milan's next appearance on the world stage will be as co-host of the 2026 Winter Olympics along with ritzy Cortina d'Ampezzo. It seems unlikely that glitz will give way to grit any time soon. If only the rest of Italy could do anything like as well. ■

France and the Sahel

A small Afghanistan

PARIS

France counts the cost of its thankless African mission

AFTER NIGHTFALL on a moonless evening last November, three French combat helicopters, backed by fighter jets, took off from military bases deep in the African Sahel. Their mission was to support a French commando operation on the ground, tracking terrorists in pickup trucks and motorbikes in the Liptako region of Mali. Flying in tight formation and close to the ground in total darkness, two of the helicopters collided. Thirteen French soldiers, the youngest aged 22, were killed.

The deaths shook France. They also revived questions about what exactly the country is doing in this vast semi-arid belt south of the Sahara desert. On January 13th, at a summit he hosted in the French southwestern town of Pau with the leaders of five Sahel countries, President Emmanuel Macron tried to provide an answer. France is there to bring "security and stability", he declared, and nothing else. "If at any time an African state asks the French army not to be there any longer," Mr Macron said irritably, "we'll leave."

The paradoxes and agonies of the French operation, known as "Barkhane", have been brutally exposed by these deaths, as well as those of (many more) troops from other African countries. In early January 89 soldiers from Niger died in a jihadist ambush of a military post in Chinagodrar, near the border with Mali. This followed a separate attack on a military base in Niger, at Inates, that killed 71 soldiers. The borderlands between Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali have become a zone of chronic instability, trafficking and jihadist activity. This has thrived in the Sahel following the collapse of Islamic State in Syria ►►

