

The Return of Politics

By Kadri Liik

Sunday's presidential election in Russia will not be free and fair. Its outcome is predetermined and everyone knows it. But, paradoxically, instead of throwing the country into prolonged stagnation, as many people fear, Vladimir Putin's third election victory may signal a return of real politics to Russia and – with some luck and contrary to Putin's plans – may lead to the re-establishment of a link between politics and policies that was lost long before Putin froze the whole political system. With bad luck, however, things can go wrong at almost any moment.

March 4: Testing Putin's strength

March 4 will not be a decisive day for Russia, a day that will determine its future directions. It will be the start rather than the end of a long process of political transformation, the exact outcome of which will remain unclear for months, if not for years. However, the events of March 4 and 5 are still worthy of close observation, as they will give an early indication of the extent to which Putin will be weakened and of the nature of his conflict with an unhappy population.

Weakening Putin and making his presidency as illegitimate as possible are the opposition's main goals at these elections. There is no candidate who truly represents them – the leader of Yabloko Grigory Yavlinsky could have attracted some sincere backers, but he was refused registration probably for this very reason. Billionaire businessman Mikhail Prokhorov tries to cautiously court the liberal vote, but he is deemed to be too dependent on Putin and part of the Kremlin's plan, regardless of whether he realises this or not. So, the advice given by protest leaders is simple and tactical: certainly go to vote and pick any candidate except Putin, or, if none is acceptable, spoil your ballot paper.

According to various polls, Putin is likely to take 53–66% of the vote at a fairly low turnout (around 55%) and thus he will win in the first round. True, polls are not trusted universally – not only may some be skewed to meet the Kremlin's needs, but in addition the predictions by the most independent polling agencies, such as the Levada Center, for the parliamentary elections in December were slightly inaccurate, suggesting that the United Russia would win 53% of the vote, whereas the official outcome was 49%¹ and the actual (pre-rigging) result probably did not exceed 35% according to the party's own calculations.²

¹ According to Boris Dubin, a researcher at the Levada Center, vote rigging in previous years feeds into the predictions made later because given the absence of reliable national census data, sociologists use the lists of registered voters as their model for society – but these lists can be “doctored”. ICDS interview with Boris Dubin, March 1, 2012.

² ICDS interview with a United Russia member, February 28, 2012.

It is interesting to point out that a deliberately engineered second round has figured in the calculations of Putin's campaign managers. According to a source in the United Russia, the so-called liberals around Putin (the most notable member of whom is former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin) had suggested a runoff with the second most popular candidate, Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov, claiming that a weaker victory would seem more legitimate and, furthermore, would help to solve the "problem of the prime minister".³ But the idea was rejected for obvious reasons – two more weeks of campaigning against just one candidate would have required a change in campaign tactics and would have allowed the protesters and the opposition to try to mobilise around Zyuganov, which would have resulted in too much unpredictability.

So, Putin's win in the first round is virtually guaranteed, unless a dramatic and completely unexpected change in voter behaviour or a major error in the 'vote-counting technologies' of the Central Electoral Commission occurs.

March 5: It was never about the elections anyway

On March 5, the protesters will gather on Pushkin Square in Central Moscow.⁴ Their numbers, but more importantly their slogans will provide a preliminary indication of how the protest movement will start to evolve.

It is vital to understand that the stolen elections never served as the underlying cause of the protests and that the slogan 'For honest elections' – despite its prominence and significance – never formulated the true focus of the protestors' demands. In Russia, elections have been rigged more often than not and the 2011 parliamentary elections certainly did not offer the worst example of that practice. Neither did smartphones and the Internet make a crucial difference, although they were helpful for documenting and spreading evidence of falsifications. Falsifications have also been documented earlier and have always been known to happen. What made these elections different was that after so many years and for the first time in the 21st century, society decided to condemn the practice.

The real root cause of the protests is that Russian society – or at least some pivotal sections of it – has outgrown the system of managed democracy and is sick of corruption that inevitably stems from it. Disillusionment had been spreading for more than a year, but Putin's 'political

³ Putin promised to make the incumbent President Dmitry Medvedev his prime minister after the elections, but in the months that followed the popularity of the latter plummeted, making him a liability in a complicated political situation. Furthermore, the relationship between the two seems to have deteriorated. Still, it would be unacceptable for Putin to take back his word at whim, but if he faced a second round with Zyuganov, he could ask Mikhail Prokhorov to lend him support in exchange for the prime minister's job. That would effectively have been a fake repetition of Boris Yeltsin's real election tactics in 1996, when Yeltsin's campaign managers helped a left-wing nationalist, Alexander Lebed, to organise a good campaign, thereby preventing Zyuganov from winning outright; before the second round Lebed supported Yeltsin and was awarded the post of the chairman of the Security Council.

⁴ For weeks, there was much haggling over this gathering, as the Moscow City Government did not want to authorise a public demonstration on the Kremlin's side of the Moscow River. Finally, a permit for just 10,000 people was granted. (Pushkin Square is about a kilometre from the Kremlin, but on the same side of the river.)

technologists' failed to detect its first signs and thereby missed the chance to prevent its escalation. The announcement on September 24 about Medvedev's and Putin's job swap delivered the final blow: while some people may have been disappointed that Medvedev did not get an opportunity to continue, many more felt humiliated by the unsophisticated and patronising style in which the news was presented – the leaders did not even bother to pretend to take their people seriously any more.

Ivan Krastev and Steven Holmes spotted it in their article: "Managed democracy was at heart a theatrical performance and it has failed in the way that mediocre performances can fail. (---) What finally ruined the show was that it provided no entertainment either."⁵

Had society's discontent manifested itself earlier, the authorities could have tried to channel it into the electoral process – provided, of course, that they had understood how doing so could have furthered their interests. But Putin probably became aware of his plummeting popularity only on November 20, when he was booed at a Moscow stadium. By then, it was already too late to modify the approach towards the elections which were, as a result, carried out in the usual carefully controlled manner – no better or worse than the Russian average. This provided the discontented a handy, or even a conventional, pretext for taking to the streets.

In December, angry voters pressed for legitimate demands – a new vote count and a review of the election results – despite their limited political significance. If votes had been counted fairly, the United Russia would have lost its absolute majority and Yabloko would probably have got into the Duma. This would have altered the composition of the Duma, making its relationship with the Kremlin more reminiscent of the Yeltsin years when the Kremlin still always got its way, but had to put up with more haggling and horse-trading. This outcome would have served as a clear sign of the deterioration of Putin's monopolistic hold on voter support, but as a political arrangement it would have been a dead end.

In March, some vote rigging will certainly occur, but the political significance of that will be at least equally questionable. Everyone agrees that Putin could win honestly – if not in the first, then in the second round. A second round would mean some continued political turbulence and new opportunities for the opposition. It might have a slight impact on the nature of Putin's forthcoming presidency. But these speculations aside, the outcome of the elections would still be the same: Vladimir Putin.

So, the slogan 'For honest elections' simply misses the main point. Furthermore, it is clearly impossible to stage honest elections in the framework of the current monopolistic presidential system. Igor Klyamkin, Vice-President of the Foundation Liberal Mission, explains it eloquently: "Once the president has monopolistic power, he will rely solely on bureaucracy. Once he relies on bureaucracy, there will be a power vertical. To make the bureaucratic apparatus support him, favours and privileges will be used – consequently, it'll be a vertical of corruption. And a vertical of corruption leaves no place for law and honest elections."⁶

⁵ Stephen Holmes & Ivan Krastev, "The Sense of an Ending," <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2012-02-17-krastev-en.html>.

⁶ Igor Klyamkin, "Sistema ne dopustit chestnyh vyborov," <http://www.liberal.ru/articles/5611>.

Putin's third presidency

It is evident that Putin's third presidential term will get off to a rough start and many people doubt whether Putin will even see the end of that term. His campaign rhetoric demonstrates that he does not understand the underlying causative factors behind the protests. "He is offended," says media observer Anna Katchkayeva. "I gave you everything and you respond to me with that' – this is how he feels about the people."⁷

The fact that Putin has actively been campaigning is remarkable in itself – he has not recognised the need to publish his political programmatic theses in any previous election – but his articles and statements have failed to properly address the concerns of society, as they emphasise stability and resort to anti-American rhetoric instead. True, both lines of argument have been quite persuasive for some – stability, together with the absence of alternatives, is the prime motivation for pro-Putin voters, while anti-American sentiment is on the rise again.⁸ Nevertheless, this is yesterday's agenda, rhetoric that is employed for lack of anything better.

"Russians actually would like to see someone like [John F.] Kennedy – someone who would say something simple, but inspiring, forward-looking," says Boris Mezhev, an editor and a political philosopher.⁹ Putin's rhetoric, by contrast, is defensive and rooted in the 1990s. People – even his own supporters – do not associate him with hope, as was the case twelve or eight years ago, but with a lack of viable alternatives. The decline in the quantity and quality of his support undermines Putin's credibility, while his inability to adapt to his weaker status remains questionable, meaning that he simply risks becoming inadequate.

Putin lacks legitimacy to conduct painful reforms, including pension and education reforms. At the same time, the populist policies pursued over the last years are unlikely to bring rewards much longer – a shortage of money may turn out to be an obstacle, but in addition the policies have clearly lost their efficiency. The urban middle class is not content any more with mere increases in wealth – at the very least these people want their wealth to be protected by the rule of law, which Putin cannot uphold. The lower classes, however, do not perceive their wellbeing to be growing at all, even if official numbers (such as pension increases compared to the inflation index) demonstrate the opposite.¹⁰

Furthermore, as summed up by Nikolai Petrov from the Carnegie Moscow Center, there are some obvious risk factors with a potential destabilisation effect on Putin's regime, which could hit it hard and unexpectedly at virtually any moment: the explosive situation in the North Caucasus, the appalling state of the country's technological infrastructure and the low quality of government services in many regions, which increase the possibility that local crises may escalate into something much bigger.¹¹

⁷ ICDS conversation with Anna Katchkayeva, February 29, 2012.

⁸ Briefing by Nikolai Petrov and Masha Lipman at the Carnegie Moscow Center on February 29, 2012.

⁹ ICDS interview with Boris Mezhev, February 28, 2012.

¹⁰ ICDS interview with sociologist Boris Dubin, November 23, 2011.

¹¹ Nikolai Petrov, "More volnuyetsa raz," <http://www.carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=46841>.

The elite ponders change

A weakened and potentially inadequate Putin is becoming a liability for his own elite – the people who have Putin to thank for gaining and maintaining their wealth and social standing. The possibility of a coup is being discussed in seminar rooms and at dinner tables. As it is difficult to assess the actual ability of Putin's inner circle to self-organise and to go against their leader, people have different opinions on the issue. Carnegie's Nikolai Petrov divides Putin's entourage into 'managers' and 'stakeholders'. The first are mostly the *siloviki*, the men who share a common background in the security services and who dutifully perform the tasks they are assigned to without being tempted to go against their leader. But the 'stakeholders' – the businesspeople who have benefitted from Putin's system, if not from his direct personal patronage – might consider the bigger picture and become worried. "I think it will be similar to a settling of scores in the criminal world – there is a godfather, but one day his subordinates will gather and topple him from his throne," speculates Petrov.¹²

However, Vladimir Milov, an expert and an opposition politician, disagrees. Milov claims that similarly to the wider Putinist elite, his informal inner circle has lived through years and years of negative selection – people have been promoted and given access to resources in exchange for their loyalty rather than their brains. In fact, Putinist businessmen whom Petrov calls 'stakeholders' may be as independent in their business activities as Medvedev was in the president's position. "They may be phantoms whose wealth does not really belong to them," suspects Milov. This leaves Putin's inner circle with a very few figures whose vision and clout would allow them to mount a coup, yet these people are personally loyal to Putin and would never go against him. "The Soviet leadership was better equipped [for staging a coup], but you saw how weak the GKChP¹³ was," Milov sums up. "Vladimir Kryuchkov¹⁴ was singlehandedly behind it. In the current inner circle, there is no Kryuchkov."¹⁵

Leaving aside the speculations about a full-fledged coup, it is quite logical – and to some extent already obvious – that the Putinist elite would start to appreciate the virtues of devolution of monopolistic power. "If you owe a bank a small sum, it is your problem; if you owe a big sum, it becomes the bank's problem," Petrov points out and compares the Kremlin to a creditor: "The Kremlin needs a structured opposition which they could try to co-opt or bribe."¹⁶ The current protesters' refusal to be structured and to select proper leaders has turned the handling of the discontented into a complicated task, at which the Kremlin has so far failed.

Putin himself still seems to believe in the future of 'managed democracy'. He is visibly proud of his system's controllability all through the years of economic success and crisis. New electoral legislation, proposed by President Medvedev after the start of the protests and unveiled as a

¹² ICDS interview with Nikolai Petrov, February 28, 2012.

¹³ *Gosudarstvenniy Komitet po Chrezvichaynomu Polozheniyu* (the State Committee of the State of Emergency) that led the August coup in 1991.

¹⁴ Vladimir Kryuchkov (1924-2007) was KGB Chairman in 1988-91 and one of the masterminds of the August Coup.

¹⁵ ICDS interview with Vladimir Milov, February 29, 2012.

¹⁶ ICDS interview with Nikolai Petrov, February 28, 2012.

draft law on February 16, has a seemingly liberalising effect, but in fact it will favour big, well-branded and not excessively leader-centric political parties at Duma elections and will establish the 'presidential filter' on governor candidates – that is, a pre-selection process by Putin.

Still, it is obvious to other members of the Putinist elite that in the future the Duma will have to include non-Kremlin-manipulated parties that have a stake in the government's work and that thereby become co-responsible for state policies, lending them popular legitimacy that they otherwise would lack. Former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin made a passionate appeal along these very lines: "That arrangement would probably lead to a more left-wing Duma and less good economic, monetary and fiscal policies than I would like, but this will be a phase we need to pass for the greater good in the future."¹⁷

Even a coup against Putin, should it really happen, could result in decentralisation. "The Putinist elite cannot find a new Putin among themselves," argues Nikolai Petrov. "He could only come from one of the clans, but that would be unacceptable to the other clans. So they will have to split power. How? By strengthening the institutions and dividing them among the clans."¹⁸

However, it is most likely that a true change of the system cannot happen without a constitutional reform – and that indispensable part is still largely absent from the elite's as well as the opposition's vocabulary, although it is increasingly being debated on the Internet and elaborated by experts. Some politicians suggest that a system change can be enforced by simply adopting 'good practices' – expecting presidents to voluntarily appoint winners of the Duma elections to serve in the government. However, as past practice demonstrates, presidents have made similar moves at times of crisis (the case in point is the effectively Communist government of Yevgeny Primakov, appointed by Yeltsin after the 1998 financial crisis), only to be reversed once times got easier. Keeping the monopolistic power of president can only lead to a bad czar being replaced with a 'good' one for as long as he stays 'good'. A parliamentary system, on the other hand, does not guarantee democracy either – in the situation characterised by weak political parties and 'authoritarian inertia', which is certainly present in Russia, a prime minister with a firm hold over the Duma majority can become equally monopolistic. In fact, for the last four years Russia has effectively been a parliamentary state headed by a prime minister and occasionally represented by a president with nominal power. This has certainly not been a democratic arrangement. So, a semi-presidential arrangement seems to be best suited for Russia for now.¹⁹

Political permafrost melting

What will happen next? In the West, the more superficial Russia-watchers seem to be divided into several camps. Some expect Putin to re-enter the Kremlin unaffected by any of this and to continue governing practically in the same style as earlier. Others expect him to tighten the screws. Still others keep their eyes on the protesters, expecting a common leader to emerge, a

¹⁷ Alexei Kudrin's speech at a seminar at the Foundation Liberal Mission (Liberalnaya Missiya) on February 29, 2012.

¹⁸ ICDS interview with Nikolai Petrov, February 28, 2012.

¹⁹ A persuasive case has been made by Igor Klyamkin, Lilia Shevtsova and Mikhail Krasnov in "V Konstitutsii ne dolzhno byt mesto dlya vozhdya," <http://www.liberal.ru/articles/5569>.

strategy of political battle to be devised or even a revolution to break out. The reality, however, is likely to be more complex than any of these fairly straightforward scenarios.

Some of the prominent protesters indeed perceive the absence of a common leader as a major drawback. “Revolutions have leaders, but the popularity of ours never exceeds 12%,” laments Vladimir Milov who deeply regrets that the protest movement could not mobilise itself to register Alexei Navalny as its presidential candidate – Navalny declined the offer – or could not put enough pressure on the authorities to register Grigory Yavlinsky.²⁰ Milov is probably too harsh in his self-recriminations – it would have been next to impossible to gather two million signatures needed for registration in a short time between the start of the protests in December and the registration deadline in mid-January and to follow all the intricate rules and regulations in the meanwhile (for example, one can only sign a list in the region where one is registered as a voter). In any case, the Central Electoral Commission can arbitrarily disqualify anyone if it chooses to do so.

For all that, the absence of a common leader is not necessarily a flaw. The opposition consists of very diverse groups – there are liberals, nationalists, recently reformed Stalinists... What unites them is protest, not a joint positive programme. If they had had a single leader who could accommodate all these different worldviews to some extent, this would have created a niche for another Yeltsin – a powerful leader, good at destroying systems, but also at converting his success into monopolistic power. But the Russians – and first and foremost the protesters – have grown weary of monopolistic power. Furthermore, many of them have grown weary of politics as such – in their eyes, it is profoundly discredited, even dirty, and they are drawn more towards apolitical intellectuals, such as author Boris Akunin or former TV journalist Leonid Parfyonov.

Some protest leaders are engaged in the blame game with Putin: the latter disparages the Yeltsin years for their lawlessness and chaos, while he praises his time in office as an era of stability and prosperity; the oppositionists – many of whom used to be active in the 1990s – regard the same Yeltsin period as a time of liberty and Putin’s rule as an autocracy. Interestingly, what might be more significant is the feeling one gets when talking to people on the streets: for them, the 1990s and the 2000s are increasingly lumped together as two sides of the same coin, one leading to the other. If so, that means disillusionment with the system of imitational democracy as such and not only with the neo-Putinist version of it.

This hypothesis is supported by the evolution in political tastes. Suddenly, slick conformists seem to have lost their appeal – people look for politicians who speak their mind. “The time of simulacrum is over; now everything natural is in demand,” several analysts say independently and almost in an identical manner.²¹

“People are tired of deputies,” confirms sociologist Boris Dubin,²² referring to a short story by Andrei Platonov, written in 1927, where a young civil servant, sent to a provincial town, complains: “Who are we? We are deputies for proletarians. For example, I am a deputy for a

²⁰ ICDS interview with Vladimir Milov, February 29, 2012.

²¹ ICDS interview with Alexei Makarkin, February 27, 2012; Andrei Ryabov on February 29, 2012.

²² ICDS interview with Boris Dubin, March 1, 2012

revolutionary and a master. Do you understand? Everything is mixed up. Everything has become fake. You are not real, but surrogates!"²³

Indeed, surrogates are seen not only among the pro-Kremlin side of the political landscape, nor are they limited to the so-called systemic opposition – the parties represented in the Duma who have been excellent 'sparring partners' for presidents. As of now, all Russian political parties or groups, from the United Russia to Eduard Limonov's National Bolsheviks to single actors such as Alexei Navalny, are effectively the products of the system of managed democracy. In order to survive without the Kremlin-dictated script, which allowed only for very limited improvisation, they will all have to adapt drastically and it is probable that not all of them will make it.

The political parties are feeling a wind of change. Suddenly, some hitherto unimaginable alliances are emerging between the Duma opposition and the street opposition – such as a cordial relationship and cooperation between Gennady Zyuganov and Sergei Udaltsov. Some liberals cooperate with Yabloko. The transformation of nationalists will be a process to follow – among younger Russians, nationalism is transforming from its imperialist form to a defensive and exclusivist version, with potentially major future implications for Russian foreign policy, among other things.²⁴ Splits, mergers and different realignments will definitely also involve the parties created by the Kremlin, once real politics has gained a firm upper hand over surrogate politics.

Vladimir Milov suggests that there will be room for at least four substantial groupings on Russia's political landscape: liberal-democratic, left-wing-socialist, bureaucratic and nationalist parties²⁵. This sounds logical. But at the moment, the whole political landscape that is only just emerging from Putin's permafrost can be compared to the ancient continent of Gondwana, from which the contours of future America, Antarctica, Africa and Australia are yet to be extracted.

Conclusions

The protests that we are currently witnessing in Russia have often been compared to the colour revolutions in Georgia and in Ukraine or to the more recent upheavals in North Africa. In fact, their root causes, the social composition of the protestors, the standing of their leaders and their potential dynamics make them much more complex. A clear black-and-white polarisation between the incumbents and the challengers has not yet emerged; maybe it never will.

But it is evident that after 20 years a considerable and ever growing part of Russian society is ready to pick up the unfinished business of *perestroika* and to finally get truly rid of the country's Stalinist legacy. According to Yuri Levada, the grand old man of Russian sociology, the latter would involve four tasks: first, stop running the country as if it were in a permanent state of emergency; secondly, create functional institutions that work for the benefit of the people;

²³ Andrei Platonov, 'Gorod Gradov,' in *Chastlivaya Moskva*, Moscow, Eksmo, 2010, p. 202.

Translation by Kadri Liik.

²⁴ The process is described in more detail by Nicu Popescu in "Russia's Liberal-Nationalist Cocktail: Elixir of Life or Toxic Poison?", <http://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/nicu-popescu/elixir-of-life-or-toxic-poison-russias-liberal-nationalist-cocktail>.

²⁵ ICDS Interview with Vladimir Milov, February 29, 2012

thirdly, achieve a permanent rise in living standards; and fourth, find Russia's place in the world without constantly threatening others.²⁶

In the past 20 years, only the living standards have seen some progress. One hopes that the next 20 years will bring more advancement. Unless, of course, Russia is unlucky yet again...

²⁶ Yuri Levada, 'Osmyslit kult Stalina,' in *Stalinskie alternativy*, Moscow, Progress, 1989, p. 448-459.