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A COLLAPSING FAÇADE?

THE RUSSIAN DUMA ELECTION IN PERSPECTIVE

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Photo: Sinikukka Saari, FIIA

- The Duma election and its results reinforce the prevailing undemocratic trends in Russia. The changes in electoral laws, the election campaign and its biased coverage in the Russian media, the Russian authorities' hostile attitude towards international election observation and the so-called Putin's Plan leave very little hope of democratic pluralism developing in Russia anytime soon.
- Russia's political system has been built gradually over the years. The system aims at controlling the competition for power and securing the political elite's interests. The system is characterised by non-transparent and manipulated political processes, misleading doublespeak on democratic norms, and the misuse of soft and hard administrative resources.
- Putin's overwhelming popularity does not compensate for the lack of democratic accountability. Likewise, his possible premiership would not strengthen parliamentarism in Russia because the decision is driven by instrumentalism towards political institutions. Instead, it would create a dangerous precedent for an ad hoc separation of power.
- Western actors should be more aware that the stability that Putin is often praised for bringing about is not built on solid ground, and they should change their policies accordingly. Promoting democracy – and thus long-term stability – in Russia is in western actors' interests.

Putin's Plan?

The Russian Duma election held on Sunday 2 December was preceded by near-hysterical speculation on the so-called Putin's Plan. The speculation was fuelled in September when Putin agreed to lead the United Russia party list and possibly take up the post of prime minister. Putin has not revealed the exact content and form of his plan but he has expressed his view that the Duma elections should be taken as a referendum on his political future. The Russian people have now responded to this call with overwhelming support for United Russia and for Putin's leadership.

The State Duma now consists of four parties, which were able to pass the 7 per cent vote threshold: United Russia (with 64.1 per cent of the vote), the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (11.6 per cent), Zhirinovskiy's Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia (8.2 per cent) and A Just Russia (7.8 per cent). The CPRF's presence in the State Duma is an expected flaw in the otherwise complete domination by pro-Putin parties. After Putin's decision to lead the United Russia party list, A Just Russia could not convincingly insist on being a pro-Putin party in opposition to United Russia and this, in turn, strengthened the appeal of the CPRF. This, however, matters very little: the pro-Putin camp will have a strong stipulated majority and thus the opposition members will be effectively crushed.



Photo: Katri Pynnöniemi, FIIA

The election campaign and the election results reinforce the prevailing undemocratic trends in Russia. The politically motivated changes in election laws and electoral administration, refusals and cancellations of registration of opposition parties, one-sided election campaign coverage by the state-controlled media and the authorities' hostile attitude towards, and severe restrictions on, international election observation are all pieces in this carefully constructed puzzle. Despite

the fact that 11 parties were officially running in the election, there were only few real alternatives available. The election suggests that politics in Russia has become an intra-elite affair carried out behind the scenes without transparency and popular involvement.

Now, after the Duma election, the speculation about

Putin's Plan will be shifting to another level. How will the popular president be defining his role as a "national leader" of Russia in practice? There are various options available for manipulating the soft edges of Russia's legal provisions in order to remain in power without changing the constitution. Three widely held predictions have been made concerning the way in which Putin may choose to play his cards:

Option 1

Putin may become prime minister after his presidential term ends in 2008. A candidate recommended by Putin would win the presi-

dential election. Soon after the latter, the new president would resign and Putin would become the acting president. He would later be re-elected as president.

Option 2

Putin may resign from his presidential post straight after the parliamentary election and become the prime minister. The main candidate would resign before the presidential election and Putin would be nominated as a presidential candidate and later elected as president. Some specialists claim that the constitution would not be violated in this case since Putin would be entering the presidential race from the post of prime minister.

Option 3

Putin would pursue his career as a “national leader” of Russia from the post of prime minister. He would be the one in charge while the elected president would simply be sitting in the Kremlin acquiescing in decisions made by Putin.

Although all of the options above are more or less unconstitutional in spirit, the third scenario is the most dangerous one. Putin’s longer-term premiership combined with political leadership would consolidate the personification of power in Russia. This kind of instrumental ad hoc separation of powers would create more long-term uncertainty about the location of executive power. In comparison, altering the constitution on the maximum number of consecutive presidential terms with the approval of two-thirds of the State

Duma and three-quarters of the Council of Federation would have been a significantly milder breach of constitutionalism.

Institutionalised non-democracy

United Russia’s main election campaign slogan was “Putin’s plan – victory for Russia”. The slogan embodies the hollowness of the political choices Russians are offered: the plan is essentially a request for *carte blanche* for Putin.

This elimination of political choices has been carried out gradually by non-transparent and manipulated political processes, misleading doublespeak on democratic norms, and the misuse of soft and hard administrative resources around elections. This system interweaves

democratic elements such as popular elections, civil society activism and parties while at the same time eliminating meaningful political competition. If one digs somewhat deeper, many of these democratic elements will turn out to be to a certain extent illusory: the creation and funding of “opposition” parties and “non-governmental” activism, and the manipulation of information and media coverage. What makes these practices hard to spot is the fact that they are often ambiguously embedded in democratic sound bites.

Although many of these practices started developing during the Yeltsin years out of “necessity”, they are not strictly need-driven anymore. These practices have become



Photo: Katri Pynnöniemi, FIIA

an essential and institutionalised part of the Russian political system.

After the last round of elections four years ago, there was still some speculation about the direction that developments in Russia would take. Many observers believed that Putin was, in fact, sorry to see Russia's liberal opposition in tatters. This time around there are fewer questions. During the election campaign, Putin aggressively described liberals as "jackals begging in front of foreign embassies" who would like to see Russian society disoriented and divided. Reflecting the elite's mistrust in open competition, the Russian electoral laws were carefully rewritten before the elections so that liberal opposition parties would be permanently marginalized, all independent candidates would be eliminated from the Duma, and the elected Duma representatives would not be able

to change their party affiliations during their term in office. The restrictions on the minimum number of votes have also been lifted and the option of voting "against all" has been done away with.

Putin and the ruling elite he represents did not need these legislative changes and undemocratic practices in order to beat the opposition candidates in these elections. Indeed, the elite's interests extend beyond this. They wish to consolidate their power within the system so that they will win election after election with the ease of a routine-like

administrative activity. It is because of this more fundamental goal that the manipulative tactics are called for. As the Putin regime does not need these tactics in order to ensure its mere political survival, it is also more successful in consolidating its power than its predecessor.

The Russian general public is not oblivious of electoral manipulation and very few Russians claim that the current Russian system is democratic. Only 37 per cent of respondents in a survey carried out by the Levada

Center in January 2007 felt that democracy exists in their country at all. However, half of the respondents believed that Russia needs democracy.

Nevertheless, most Russians are quietly acquiescent when it comes to the prevailing undemocratic practices. This seems to be due to a general feeling of powerlessness amongst the Russian people.

An overwhelming majority of the survey respondents believed that they have little, very little or no influence at all on what goes on in their country (94 per cent) or even in their city or region (93 per cent). The authorities further encourage this passivity by their aggressive approach to political discord within the society.¹



Photo: Katri Pynnöniemi, FIIA

¹ <http://www.eu-russiacentre.org/assets/files/EU-RC%20Levada%20Research%20Commentary.pdf>

Popularity does not equal democracy

Many western observers and Russians alike draw comfort from the fact that Russians do overwhelmingly support Putin. He really is the people's choice and thus the legitimate leader of Russia. However, Putin's overwhelming popularity cannot be equated with democracy.

In democracies, institutions are more important than persons and this fact results in the long-term predictability of political developments. In democracies, bad policies by the leader lead to a change of leader, not to the replacement of the whole system. Despite the changes in leadership the system remains stable.

In contrast, in Russia the order and its legitimacy rest on the shoulders of a single person. As long as Putin remains in power and makes decisions approved by the people at large, and as long as the overall situation remains favourable, the Russian system will appear to be stable. When all or some of these conditions change, the system will become unpredictable.

Hence, the stability of Russia is not built on solid ground. Putin is, without a doubt, the people's choice, but one has to consider the bigger picture. By making himself irreplaceable, Putin is jeopardising the long-term trajectory of Russia's stable development.

What should the European actors do?

Western actors, including Finland, should be more aware of these inherent risks build into the current undemocratic Russian system and change their policies accordingly. For too long the western, and particularly European, actors have turned a blind eye to the undemocratic developments in Russia in the name of securing common interests and stability. It is high time they realised that only

by defending democratic values can Europe promote long-term stability in Russia.

As a result of Russia's current aggressive attitude towards international democracy promotion and their own ill-advised policies, western actors have little chance of influencing Russian undemocratic practices in the short-term. They should, however, take a more long-term and gradualist view.

Democracy in Russia is best promoted by western actors through a three-fold policy:

1. A realistic, open and honest assessment of the developments taking place in Russia

- A realistic overall assessment of the developments in Russia is a key factor in making western policies towards Russia more effective.
- European actors should refrain from repeating over-used rhetoric about "common values" between Europe and Russia and Russia's "path towards democracy", which may indirectly legitimise the doublespeak engaged in by the Russian authorities. The European states should admit their failure vis-à-vis Russia and revise their approach (see below).

2. Pursuing firm, consistent and coherent policies towards Russia

- Western actors should not be swayed when faced with Russia's tough stances and aggressive attitude but pursue firm, consistent and coherent policies towards the country.
- Western actors should not exclude Russia from cooperation but they should be firm on the conditions and not be daunted using issue-linkage to gain leverage where feasible.

- In particular, the EU member states should work towards achieving a consensus on how to deal with Russia in order to increase the effectiveness of European policies.

3. Active and positive engagement with the Russian people

- While not giving in to Russia's leadership, western actors should reach out to the Russian citizens by actively promoting contacts and dialogue between their nationals and Russians.
- In practical terms in the European context the above could entail, among other things, visa-free travel, short- and long-term exchanges and scholarships at various levels of education between Russians and EU nationals, study programmes and training in Russia, as well as providing information and organising events, not just in big cities but throughout the country.

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