



THE END OF THE PUTIN ERA?

A. C. Monaghan

JULY 2012

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Summary

Much recent commentary on Russia consists of binary attempts to predict the country's future: Putin or Medvedev? Will Putin maintain his grip on power or will his system collapse? The result is a short-sighted and one-dimensional discussion. The reality is much more complicated.

Putin does indeed appear to have lost his “Teflon” image and support for the ruling United Russia Party is waning. The opposition parties in parliament—the systemic opposition—were strengthened by the December 2011 parliamentary elections and succeeded in gaining some positions of power in the body. Soon after the vote, however, tens of thousands of Russians took to the streets to protest the falsification of election results. As a result, many observers have seen the demonstrations as an unprecedented “re-politicization” of Russian society and the emergence of an increasingly politically active urban middle class led by a new wave of nonsystemic opposition figures.

Yet, all forms of opposition are fractured and far from presenting a real challenge to the Putin system. The demonstrations remain limited in scale and are not the face of a swelling, unified opposition democratic movement. Moreover, the careers of the current systemic opposition leaders may be ending. Its senior figures were defeated handily in the presidential election and are now likely to wrestle with internal power struggles.

Setting the movement back further is Putin's unwillingness to guarantee that he will engage in the kind of reforms that many opponents and some supporters claim are required. An attempt to implement slow, evolutionary change appears to be the most likely way forward for the Russian leadership. This was already seen in one of the Kremlin's early responses to the demonstrations—the dismissal of a number of officials and the promise that after the election there would be a serious “rotation” of personnel. A rotation, however, does not mean a deep reshuffle with the firing of senior officials.

In the immediate term at least, Putin is not losing power. Of course, with the left-leaning parties in parliament offering some opposition and numerous practical difficulties wracking the country, from insufficient or decrepit infrastructure to corruption, Putin's leadership team still confronts many challenges. But it is far from clear that the end of the Putin era is nigh.

Putin and the Election

“We have won in an open and fair struggle.” Thus Vladimir Putin announced victory in the first round of the Russian presidential elections in March this year. Official figures showed that Putin won with a large majority, gaining some 64 percent of a 65 percent turnout. The closest challenger was the leader of the Communist Party, Gennady Zyuganov, who gained just 17 percent. If the scale of Putin’s victory was challenged, even opposition figures conceded that he had won a majority. Opposition or independent sources suggested that the official results inflated his margin of victory by 10 percent—but even by these figures, he has secured well over the 50 percent required to win outright in the first round.

Putin’s victory brought to a close a yearlong election period in Russia, beginning with regional elections in March 2011. At the same time, it ended four years of uncertainty about Putin’s role in Russia’s politics. Initially, this uncertainty was about whether Putin would run for the presidency or whether it would be Dmitri Medvedev who would seek another term. That question was resolved in September. But by mid-December, uncertainty had returned as a result of a series of protest demonstrations, as tens of thousands of people went out onto the streets after the December parliamentary elections and commentators began to wonder whether Putin could win in the first round—or even win legitimately at all.

Many saw these demonstrations as an awakening of politics in Russia, the strengthening of the opposition, and a serious challenge to Putin’s leadership—even believing that the “edifice of his regime had been cracked.” Putin appeared to be losing touch with Russian society and even to be in conflict with a growing popular movement in favor of democracy. As a result, many argued that Russia faces a political crisis, and an expert consensus emerged that although Putin would win the election, the end of the Putin era had begun.¹

But it is too early to assert the end of the Putin era. Instead, despite some strengthening of the “systemic” opposition parties as a result of the December vote, it is more likely to be the end of the era of the current opposition leadership. Demonstrations aside, the real opposition Putin faces is not from a democratic movement but from wider societal and political problems that will prevent him from effectively implementing his agenda.

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Getting Russia Right

Much commentary throughout the last four years was based on attempting to predict or guess specific developments in Russia, usually in a binary “either/or” manner. Rolling predictions, for instance, began in 2008 of an impending split between Putin and Medvedev; with Putin representing a more conservative agenda and Medvedev representing a more modern, even liberal and reformist agenda. This evolved into watching for disagreements between the two figures and attempting to divine whether it would be Putin or Medvedev who would run for the presidency in 2012, when the campaigning would begin, and what would happen to the other as a result. Meanwhile, Russia continued to spring “surprises” on the world—perhaps most strikingly exemplified by its conflict with Georgia in 2008.

Comparative analysis has also proliferated. One trend, for instance, is to seek to compare Putin with other leaders from Russia’s imperial and Soviet past. At the more extreme end, some have drawn comparisons to Stalin. Others have compared Putin with Nikita Khrushchev, and still others with Pyotr Stolypin, leader of the Duma from 1906 to 1911, because of his efforts to rebuild Russia. This latter is one that Putin himself has to some extent encouraged (though not fully, of course, since Stolypin was assassinated). More popular have been the loosely sketched comparisons with Leonid Brezhnev.

At the same time, many have sought to compare the demonstrations since December with the “color revolutions,” particularly in Ukraine in 2004 or the series of social upheavals in parts of the Arab world. This latter comparison takes commentary full circle, since the Arab Spring itself was compared to demonstrations at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union—and indeed some observers have drawn the direct parallel, noting that the demonstrations in Russia in December were the largest since the collapse of the USSR.

Such a smorgasbord of comparisons does not help to clarify or hone thinking, or to facilitate understanding today’s new developments. Instead, it dissolves into comparing something only partially understood with something else that is only partially understood. Of course specific elements can be selected that may appear to offer a superficial similarity, but this is buffet-style comparison selecting from many and varied events, each complex and individual in themselves. Each case offers numerous differences which make such comparisons erroneous.

While some of the images and techniques drawn from the Orange revolution in Kyiv are used by organizers of the opposition demonstrations, these are complex images, and as Russian political commentator Gleb Pavlovsky has noted, in discussing the “Orange threat” it is important not to “confuse reality with propaganda.” The Orange revolution, for instance, was notable because the result was stolen by one candidate from a clear competitor. This was not the case in the Russian elections—even if the final vote for Putin was inflated

by some 10 percent as independent and opposition sources claim, there was too little support for other candidates for any claim to be made that he had “stolen” the election from anyone. Comparisons with the Arab Spring are also unhelpful. The Arab Spring is a broad umbrella term for many different and complex events in numerous countries; they cannot be lumped together and applied to Russia wholesale.

Another trend is to focus attention on Putin’s “grip” on Russian politics. Yet this has rendered many discussions one dimensional. It has suggested an “anyone but Putin” image in much of the Western discussion about the elections, an idea nourished by the political campaigning of some prominent Russian opposition figures. Such an approach, however, warps understanding of the opposition and wider situation. If, for instance, in the current context of a political landscape long starved of fresh figures, an “anyone but Putin” approach had been successful at the polling booths, the alternative would have been stark—the Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov would now be president, ruling over a Communist-dominated parliament.

Similarly, it overlooks the longer-term formation of a wider Putin-ite team. This team, which includes Dmitri Medvedev, may limit the room for maneuver that Putin has in adapting to the current situation. Furthermore, while he has dominated politics, it is not clear that his “grip” on Russia, particularly in terms of having his orders implemented, is strong. Much is made of Putin’s establishment of a “vertical of power,” a chain of authority made up of loyal subordinates, largely drawn from the security services. However, there is mounting evidence that the vertical of power does not work efficiently. Many of Putin’s orders, indeed the orders of the leadership team as a whole, are not fulfilled efficiently and the leadership is often reduced to “manual control,” with senior officials obliged to micromanage and oversee the execution of instructions themselves. By overlooking this, commentators may be missing an important element of Putin’s future agenda, and therefore a central issue in Russian politics: how to correct the problem.

Politics Emergent?

In late September 2011 at the United Russia Party congress, it was announced that, as planned, Vladimir Putin would be the leadership’s presidential candidate. The announcement frustrated those who had hoped for a second presidential term for Medvedev, who is considered more of a modernizing figure, and provoked the idea that Medvedev’s presidency had been little more than an elaborate play. At the same time, close observers were skeptical of statements about a “long-term agreement,” noting that the speeches by leading figures at the ruling party’s congress, including those of Putin and Medvedev, appeared to have been prepared more or less on the spot, in a hurry, and were even mutually contradictory.

Indeed, there was a strong sense of confusion in Russian politics throughout the summer and autumn. Disagreements about budgetary priorities led to the dismissal of Alexei Kudrin, a longtime minister of finance and a central figure in Russian politics who was widely seen as having considerable influence. Political projects, such as the one to develop the Pravoje Delo Party into a stronger force, fell through. After a prolonged search for an appropriate leader, the man introduced to head the party, Mikhail Prokhorov, a successful businessman, was quickly removed from the position amid recriminations exchanged by Prokhorov and the Kremlin on one hand (particularly Vladislav Surkov, then deputy head of the Presidential Administration) and Prokhorov and members of the Pravoje Delo Party on the other. Attempts to organize other elements of the political spectrum, such as nationalist groupings in the Congress of Russian Communities, also appeared to founder on the rocks of internal frictions.

The sense of political and public stagnation and frustration was made explicit by the parliamentary elections in December 2011. United Russia won the election, gaining 49 percent of the votes and 238 seats, enough to secure a small majority in the parliament. However, the main focus of attention turned to the flawed nature of the elections, including critiques of blurred lines between the government and United Russia, the use of government and administrative resources slanting the campaign in favor of the ruling party, and the refusal to allow political parties to register. Procedural violations were cited, including ballot box stuffing and a rather clumsy attempt to limit the role of Golos, Russia's only independent election watchdog organization. A number of liberally oriented Internet sites also suffered denial of service attacks.

United Russia's Third-Election Blues

The outcome of the parliamentary elections was interpreted by many foreign observers as a disaster for United Russia, particularly the party's loss of its super or constitutional majority (a size that would enable it to alter the Russian constitution even without the support of other parties). It certainly reflects a decline in wider public support for the party, known to many in opposition circles and in the west (as a result of opposition figure Alexei Navalny's anticorruption campaign) as the "party of thieves and crooks." Yet it does not necessarily mean that a new opposition movement is spurring a democratic transformation in the country.

The wider electoral context is important to keep in mind. This was the third time that United Russia had gone to the polls for parliamentary elections: In 2003, the party gained 37 percent of the vote (225 seats). In 2007 in a climate of strong economic growth, the

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party won by a landslide with 64.3 percent of the vote, which earned it full control of the parliament, including dominant leadership of the parliamentary committees. As Russian authorities have stated, December's performance came in the wake of the economic crisis of 2008, which had a very serious impact on Russian economic and social affairs. This combination of economic crisis, revelations of rampant corruption, and disenchantment with the manner in which Putin and Medvedev seemed to simply switch jobs is part of a "third-term syndrome." It should not come as a surprise that there is rather widespread public fatigue, disenchantment, and opposition.

The results were also compatible with recent regional results and pre-election polling, and reflect a longer, broader trend of stagnation or declining support—as opposed to a sudden demonstration of opposition. In seven of the eleven regions in which elections were held in March 2010, United Russia gained 45 percent or less of the vote. In October, polls held across Russia and published by Gazeta.ru online suggested that United Russia would win approximately 41 percent of the vote. The polling organization (VTsIOM) thought it likely that the party would go on to receive some 50 percent overall in December, but that the party would struggle in Moscow (where it polled 29 percent in October) and St. Petersburg (where it polled 31 percent in October). The results of December 5 were thus not unexpected.

A Shift to the Left in Parliament?

The opposition parties in the parliament, known as the systemic opposition, were strengthened as a result of the elections and succeeded in gaining some positions of power in the body. All the main opposition parties increased their representation in the parliament. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), which has long existed as the main substantial party of opposition in Russian politics, won 92 seats, an increase of 35 seats. Those results are an important indication of their evolving support—in seven of the eleven regions that voted in March, the KPRF won over 20 percent of the vote. The Just Russia Party, formed in 2006, some suggest with support from the authorities, as a leftist alternative to United Russia, won 64 seats in December, nearly doubling its strength in the parliament. This was a surprise result for the party, which many had seen as stagnating and facing a drop below the 7 percent threshold of support required to enter the parliament. The nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) won 11 percent and 56 seats, an increase of eleven seats.

As a consequence of those results, the opposition parties were able to bargain harder over posts in the parliament. Indeed, some opposition parliamentarians, such as Igor Lebedev, leader of the LDPR parliamentary faction, suggested that United Russia might lose control over half of the committees. And in the end, of 29 committees, United Russia deputies chair fifteen,

including budget and tax (Andrei Makarov), foreign affairs (Alexei Pushkov), and security and anticorruption (Irina Yarovaya), and the KPRF leads six.² While opposition parties mainly lead second-tier committees, it is worth noting that Vladimir Komoedov, a deputy of the KPRF, chairs the defense committee, and Leonid Slutsky, a deputy of the LDPR, chairs the committee for the Commonwealth of Independent States.

This shift in balance in the parliament—for that is what it is, rather than a shift in power—merits two broader observations. First, although many observers pointed to the fact that United Russia lost its constitutional majority, it is clear neither that United Russia desires a majority that would allow it to alter the Russian constitution on its own nor that the other parties would necessarily oppose the situation should United Russia wish to be in such a position. As the leadership has stated, the election result was sufficient for their needs. Second, the result may reflect a more general move to the Left in Russian politics, illustrated by the strengthening of the KPRF and Just Russia parties, though to what extent this is a real trend or simply revealing of a protest vote remains unclear. If the systemic opposition has grown and turned to the Left, it is also important to consider the other “nonsystemic” opposition, which many believe to be of a more liberal and more substantial nature.

Parsing the Demonstrations

The most visible demonstrations of the sense of frustration and stagnation in the country were the large public protests that took place in the wake of the parliamentary elections. Although initially small, the demonstrations grew appreciably in size—by December 10 up to some 40,000 people demonstrated in Moscow on Bolotnaya Square. Demonstrations in over 90 cities across the country on December 24 captured the attention of many as the largest anti-government rallies in Russia since 1991. Protesters took to the streets to demonstrate against the falsification of the results of the parliamentary elections, and to call for new elections and the resignations of senior figures, including Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev. The demonstrators are seen as an indication of a growing disaffection in Russia, particularly among the urban youth and the middle class—a disaffection that is being directed against “the Putin system.” While this is true, the protesters came from a wide variety of backgrounds, and the demonstrations included large numbers of communists and nationalists.

The scale of these demonstrations has proven to be a source of considerable debate, but it is reasonable to assume that in total, some 100,000 people turned out across Russia on December 24. Large-scale demonstrations, if slightly smaller, also took place in early February in the run-up to the presidential elections and immediately after both the elections, on March 5 and 10, and Putin’s inauguration on May 7. The demonstrations were seen by many

observers as reflecting an energized opposition movement, perhaps even to the extent that a drop in support for Putin might combine with surge of support for an opposition figure to force a second-round run-off in the elections. Commentators wondered how the Russian leadership would cope with a possible second-round scenario. Yet, the surge of demonstrations does not necessarily portend a sea change in the Russian system.

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Unprecedented Demonstrations?

The demonstrations have illustrated something unusual in Russian political and social life, and generated much comment about their “unprecedented” nature in post-Soviet Russia. It is very rare to see thousands, and in Moscow tens of thousands, of demonstrators on the streets. Nevertheless, the opposition demonstrations offer a more complex canvas that requires careful consideration about their context, size, and makeup. The protests Russia recently witnessed are certainly not without precedent.

Indeed, there have been other sizeable post-Soviet demonstrations in other Russian cities. In Vladivostok, for example, in late 2008 several hundred people protested against the government’s plan to raise tariffs on imported automobiles. The size of that demonstration does not compare to those that took place in Moscow recently—but it does compare to the December 2011 events in Vladivostok, and may have been even larger.

Other important demonstrations took place in 2005, when Putin’s government attempted to introduce a series of social reforms, particularly the monetization of pensions. This led to a series of large and sustained protests. Verifiable numbers are not easy to find: Some left-wing sources suggest 300,000 demonstrators took part across Russia, which would dwarf the current series of demonstrations. Others, perhaps more realistically, suggest 100,000 demonstrators across Russia in 2005—roughly equal in size to the current series of demonstrations.

What is particularly fascinating about these examples is not just their size but their outcome. The sustained protests in 2005 both forced the government into a policy reversal and seemed to make Putin more cautious in his approach to subsequent reforms. However, the current demonstrations have not had a similar impact: the demands of the current demonstrations—the resignations of senior figures, including Chairman of the Central Election Commission Vladimir Churov, and new parliamentary elections—have not been met.

The events of 2005 are also remarkable, and relevant to understanding how Russia works today because of the strong dynamic of speculation that the events in 2005 generated, which are very close to the current discussion. Many prominent politicians and observers in Russia noted a dramatic drop in Putin’s personal popularity (polls suggested that the number of those who

disapproved of Putin doubled to 28 percent). Current Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Rogozin stated that his Rodina Party of left-leaning nationalists would both lead the social protests and refuse to debate with United Russia in the parliament—the opposition was being forced onto the streets, he argued, and the reforms could lead to national protests similar to those in Ukraine’s Orange revolution.

Coming on the heels of the YuKOS case and the arrest of Mikhail Khodorskovsky, the terrorist attack in Beslan in 2004, and the Orange revolution, many believed the pensions protest in 2005 reflected deep political and social crisis. Comparisons were drawn between Putin and Gorbachev and prominent commentators noted that the specter of street revolution was in the collective mind (though it would be different from the upheavals in Ukraine since there was no figure who could unite the street revolution and take power). There were numerous predictions that the recently reelected Putin would resign or be forced from office in 2005 and that the end of the Putin era was approaching.

Quantifying the Demonstrations

Comparisons of the size of the demonstrations in 2011 and 2012 also offer interesting insight. Those on December 24, which reached a scale of some 100,000 across Russia, are often held to have been larger than those on December 10, reflecting the groundswell of an opposition movement. Moscow is of course the example used to illustrate this view—the demonstrations on December 24 were nearly double the size of those on December 10. And in some other cities, such as Rostov-on-Don, Tambov, and Krasnodar, the scale of demonstrations was slightly larger on December 24 compared to those on December 10.³

Interestingly, in many other cities, including major cities such as St. Petersburg, Novosibirsk, Ufa, and Tomsk, the demonstrations on December 24 appear to have been rather smaller than those held on December 10.⁴ This decline was not widely remarked upon in Western outlets, but received some attention in Russian media. This decline is relevant, however, given the continuing decline in scale of demonstrations after the elections—the peak of the demonstrations appears to have been in December.

Opposition Without a United Front

While many have seen the events as the “re-politicization” of Russian society and the emergence of a frustrated but increasingly politically active urban middle class led by a new wave of opposition figures, in fact the demonstrations have consisted of a wide range of participants. To a degree, the protests in December and early February were significantly enlarged by those who might be called the urban middle class. But at the core of all of the events

is a group of unregistered, small political parties (such as the Pirate Party of Russia), coalitions, and their activists. It includes not just liberal groupings such as Solidarnost but also communist parties like the Rot Front as well as nationalist groupings.

Though the movement has been joined or visited by some senior figures, it has been driven by what is known as the nonsystemic opposition: those opposition forces that are not represented in parliament. As with the systemic opposition, however, few of the leaders of this nonsystemic movement are actually new leaders, many having been in politics for years.

Despite the success it had in organizing large demonstrations, the opposition has not been able to achieve important wider goals. It has still not been able to offer a united front, which is not simply due to pressure from the state. Apart from obvious differences in political priorities between liberals and communists, the opposition and demonstration leaders have often appeared to be at odds with one another, even within factions. Although the publication of private phone conversations between prominent liberal figures led many to criticize the Kremlin and the Putin campaign for using Soviet-style smear tactics, it revealed frictions among the leading opposition personalities. There are also differences over priorities, particularly about the approach the opposition movement should take, with some proposing more provocative and combative demonstrations and others refusing such an approach. These splits became more prominent after the elections.

These nonsystemic opposition leaders have also been unable to convince the wider electorate that something must be done and have not converted the groundswell into a wider public movement. This was not just in their inability to fulfill their claims that they would organize million-participant events: both prominent liberal politician Vladimir Ryzhkov and Alexei Navalny made such claims in December and January, and more were made about demonstrations that coincided with Putin's inauguration. Public opinion, however, has not turned in the opposition's favor.

Polls conducted by the Levada Center in December, for instance, suggested that although 45 percent of respondents thought the December elections were not very honest or completely dishonest, only 25 percent of respondents expressed a willingness to support the demand for the invalidation of the results, while some 55 percent disagreed with the demand. Although 26 percent agreed that Vladimir Churov should resign, 47 percent did not want him removed. Although 64 percent believed that violations were committed, only 14 percent said such falsifications were so sizeable that they changed the election results significantly, and 40 percent said that the falsifications corresponded to their actual preferences. In the end, 51 percent were satisfied with the result to some extent (15 percent completely satisfied, 36 percent partly satisfied),

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and 20 percent believed that violations would be reduced for the presidential election. Thus, Gazeta.ru reporters suggested at the end of December that the “parliamentary elections were dishonest, but that is irrelevant.”

The Authorities Respond

One of the Kremlin leadership’s early responses to the demonstrations was to dismiss some officials and emphasize that after the election there would be a serious “rotation” of personnel. After the December elections and during the winter, a number of regional governors and city mayors resigned or were fired following poor results for United Russia in their regions. Others, including senior figures such as the governor of the Moscow region, Boris Gromov, indicated that they would retire. In December the government was reportedly preparing a list of ineffective deputy ministers responsible for the failure of government projects, and some ministers began to indicate that they would no longer continue in the new, post-election government.

At the same time, Medvedev and Putin began to make a series of appointments even in advance of the proposed “rotation.” Appointments were made to the Presidential Administration, senior parliamentary positions, the governing cabinet, and ministerial positions. So, although the focus of much commentary was on a reshuffle after Putin’s inauguration, in fact the “rotation” was a slow, ongoing development that began in the autumn of 2011. But both Putin’s first article, published in 2009, in which he discussed the difficulties of firing people, and his recent statements that a “rotation” does not necessarily mean mass firings—hinted that there would be no great personnel changes. A “rotation” does not mean a deep reshuffle with the firing of senior officials.

Reform Proposals

Another response was to launch a range of proposals for reform that purport to meet some of the demands of the opposition. Three stand out. First, in response to accusations that results were falsified, Putin proposed to place three closed-circuit television cameras in every polling booth for the presidential election. Polls suggested that the idea received popular support among a majority—but those who implemented it noted several problems, not least the cost, given that there are 95,000 polling stations in Russia. And the past did not bode well for the present. The closed-circuit television system Putin had installed to monitor reconstruction after the summer fires in 2010 was disappointing and even frustrated Putin himself.

The second proposal was to consider a return to the direct election of regional governors. Again, this gained a majority of popular support in polls, but the proposal gave rise to some skepticism about the role that the Kremlin would retain in the appointment of governors.

Third, Medvedev proposed to ease regulations governing the registration of political parties. This reform has in fact been implemented: on March 23 the parliament unanimously passed legislation that says political parties need only 500 signatures to register (a reduction from 45,000) and that reduces the electoral level of support for a party to enter parliament from 7 percent to 5 percent. Interestingly, the move to facilitate party registration did not initially gain strong popular support: in one poll, a majority thought there were too many parties already, and only a minority supported the measure. There also appears to be concern among the small opposition parties, especially the non-systemic ones, that this new legislation will facilitate the further fragmentation of the opposition, particularly the liberal-oriented parties.

On the Campaign Trail

The authorities' final major response was Putin's campaign. In the past, Putin has said that he does not like campaigning and yet that the leadership is always campaigning. In fact, Putin's 2012 election campaign—in which Putin himself, public campaign manager Stanislav Govorukhin, and political manager Vyacheslav Volodin,⁵ recently appointed to the position of deputy head of the Presidential Administration, all participated—was remarkably successful.⁶ The campaign was unusual for Putin, who had never really campaigned in this way before. It centered on Putin's own agenda, which advocated stability and included launching a website (www.putin2012.ru), publishing a series of articles in leading newspapers, holding meetings with senior figures in the media, and making campaign visits around Russia's regions.

His campaign platform, unsurprisingly, was based on elaborating the benefits of the stability his team has brought to Russia—a theme developed in the first article—and sketching out a manifesto for taking this forward. The articles broadly followed and elaborated the six programmatic lines set out on the campaign's website and echoed speeches Putin made as prime minister, for instance his speech to parliament in April 2011. The thrust of Putin's agenda has been steady development without revolution, seeking to give Russia a form of social and political immunity from upheaval. The campaign therefore emphasized social guarantees and might be considered an expression of “conservative modernization”—a slogan of United Russia during the economic crisis and the 2009–2010 debates about modernization.

The articles Putin penned received mixed reviews from other political figures and the media—Dmitri Rogozin was effusively supportive of Putin's article on defense while Communist Party head Gennady Zyuganov memorably called Putin's article on the economy “the same old liberal mush.” The opposition newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* said the articles were little more than repetitions of promises Putin had repeatedly made in the past. Meanwhile, some Western observers have noted that although the articles set out an agenda,

they did not address the real question—how the goals laid out in the articles should be achieved.⁷

Though Putin played a central part, the role of his campaign team should not be underestimated: members of his team stood in for Putin in the presidential debates, for instance. Interestingly, the team established distance between Putin and the United Russia Party, which hardly featured in the campaign. Members of Putin's team were drawn more specifically from a grouping called the All Russian People's Front, which Putin had established in May 2011. This group was initially intended to serve as a forum for generating new ideas and bringing new faces into United Russia in an effort to create a broad political coalition for the parliamentary elections. But to the extent that its role is clear at all, after the parliamentary elections, it served a more specific role to broaden the basis of Putin's campaign team and his electoral appeal.

The campaign also evolved to mirror the opposition to absorb or attempt to negate elements of it. For instance, although the opposition leadership was believed to include numerous high-profile writers and musicians and to reflect the “creative” element of Russian society, Putin himself sought to echo this by referring to classics of literature in his speeches. And numerous big names in the arts, film, and music industries were incorporated into the Putin team. While scandals emerged about some of these personalities being pressured into joining the team,⁸ many cultural figures were genuine subscribers to Putin's campaign: Stanislav Govorukhin being an obvious example.

Similarly, the Putin campaign team sought to echo the opposition's demonstrations, mounting their own, which were cast more specifically as “anti-Orange” rather than “pro-Putin” events (one campaign symbol was an orange snake being gripped by a black fist). These grew in scale in February, and the largest of the demonstrations exceeded the size of the largest opposition protest—and was the largest demonstration held in Russia since the end of the Soviet Union.⁹ Again, scandals emerged about participants being pressured or otherwise drawn into participating. The end result, however, was that Putin was able to mobilize support.

A further noteworthy aspect of Putin's campaign was the trouble taken to try to emphasize the need for fair and monitored elections: the campaign highlighted, for instance, that it was Putin's idea to have polling booths monitored by closed-circuit television cameras. Putin's campaign team also said that it would cooperate with the League of Voters, a movement established in mid-January by prominent cultural figures of more liberal persuasion to monitor elections. Putin additionally offered a monitoring role to observers from the Yabloko Party. That move was noteworthy because Yabloko's candidate for president, Grigory Yavlinsky, was not registered, and parties with unregistered candidates ordinarily cannot perform such a role. *Vedomosti* also reported that Vyacheslav Volodin, an important figure in running the campaign, had informed regional governors in explicit terms to prevent falsifications,

reminding them that direct elections for regional governors were to be reintroduced and that their futures would soon depend on the voters.

A Successful Strategy

Polls conducted by the Levada Center indicate that this campaigning (and that of the government more broadly) may have had a positive impact. They suggest that the number of those considering the December elections to have been “fair” or “more fair than not” rose from 35 percent on December 11 to 43 percent on January 12, and those thinking it was “less fair” or “unfair” fell from 45 percent to 37 percent.

The combined result of the demonstrations, the efforts of the opposition, the responses of the leadership, and the Putin campaign were reflected in the last polls before the election. These suggested that Putin would win in the first round, gaining some 60 percent (the Levada Center gave him 66 percent) and that the other candidates would be quite far behind—Gennady Zyuganov was the closest with some 15–16 percent, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy with 8–9 percent, Mikhail Prokhorov with 6–8 percent, and Sergei Mironov with 5–6 percent.

Indicative of the lack of support for the opposition candidates, polls suggested that if the elections went to a second round, the Putin vote would rise, and the support for the opposition figures would drop away significantly. In fact, the final results were not dissimilar to these final polls, though there were some slight fluctuations—Zyuganov and Prokhorov, the latter without party backing, performed slightly better, and Zhirinovskiy and Mironov slightly worse. All in all, the opposition, not Putin, lost out on election day.

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After the Election

On the evening of Sunday, March 4, a large celebratory rally was held next to the Kremlin, at which an estimated 110,000 Putin supporters met to celebrate victory. The atmosphere was redolent of a theatrical closing-night ceremony. The following day, Putin met three of the other candidates (Gennady Zyuganov refused to recognize the legitimacy of the result and declined to attend) and stated that “combat operations” were now over—and the atmosphere was of the victor meeting the defeated at the signing of a peace treaty. On March 11, as the president-elect turned to attend to formulating the 2013 budget, *Kommersant* published an article entitled “The Elections Have Passed, Responsibilities Remain,” suggestive of the fleeting, almost romantic nature of the election process.

It was a maxim of the British politician Enoch Powell that “all political lives, unless they are cut off in midstream at a happy juncture, end in failure because that is the nature of politics and human affairs.” At some time in the

future, Putin's political career will indeed end. But given the results of this election season, it might prove to be a mistake for observers to begin the new presidential term by anticipating Putin's departure. While Putin appears to have lost his "Teflon" image, and though support for the ruling party is fading,

it is far from clear that in the immediate term Putin is losing power in Russia or that the end of the Putin era is nigh. Putin remains by some distance the most popular political figure in the country. In other words, he is the politician with the greatest capacity to mobilize support.

To be sure, demonstrations seem likely to continue, and they are evolving. During the spring, they became more mobile, including "controlled strolls." But apart from a small surge in numbers at the time of the inauguration,

they remain essentially limited in scale and appear to be more reflections of public frustration than a swelling opposition movement—a shaking of the fist at the regime, rather than a serious political alternative. Upcoming lower-level (municipal and regional) elections later this year will offer more chances for the opposition movement to try to maintain its critical profile. Yet it still remains to be seen what sustained support the nonsystemic opposition can muster and how it can take advantage of the current frustrations successfully to advance a popular, vote-winning agenda of their own.

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Revamping the Vertical of Power?

It is far from clear that Putin will actually engage in the kind of reforms that many opponents and some supporters claim are required. The conclusions of the Russian leadership may differ from both foreign and Russian independent experts who urge deep social and economic reform, either on the necessity of the reforms or in how they are conducted. After all, Putin was elected on a mandate for stability, not deep change. Furthermore, the leaders' experiences in 2005, for instance, may make them cautious about instigating far-reaching reforms. An attempt to implement a slow, evolutionary change appears to be the most likely way forward.

There is some initial indication of how the Russian leadership will go about this. For one thing, the changes undertaken thus far are certainly not radical or extensive. The leadership's slow rotation of senior officials culminated in the confirmation of a new cabinet in late May. In fact, despite much speculation that Putin would appoint someone else to the position, on May 8 Medvedev was indeed appointed prime minister.¹⁰ And the personnel moves implemented were tantamount to the promised rotation, rather than a deep reshuffle: senior figures moved from the cabinet to the Kremlin and from the Kremlin to the cabinet. Some other political figures were appointed to the cabinet, including Dmitri Rogozin, and some were promoted from deputy minister to minister. Although the cabinet contains many figures new to

the government, therefore, it can hardly be said to reflect sweeping change. Instead, it appears to be more of an effort to broaden and strengthen the leadership team. This process is something that deserves nuanced attention: Who are the people being appointed? While some are familiar, others are less so. But figures such as Vyacheslav Volodin and Oleg Govorun, the new minister for regional development,¹¹ have emerged as significant players. Who is being appointed at the secondary and tertiary levels is still little understood.

In addition, Putin may well see his re-election as an opportunity to attempt to reshape the currently inefficient vertical of power. Cabinet authority has been made more streamlined: the number of first deputy prime ministers has been reduced to one (Igor Shuvalov). Other indications of such a move are apparent in the dismissal of numerous governors and in the attempt to clean up state companies and tackle the corruption which undermines authority. Indeed, *Vedomosti* reported on March 6 that Putin's first action in office was to begin to try to address the corruption of state companies. Then-Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin submitted the first results of an investigation into state companies to Putin, providing more than 200 instances where top managers faced conflicts of interest, for whom Putin promised criminal proceedings.

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The Future of the Putin System

It does indeed seem that an era may be coming to an end in Russian politics—just not the Putin era. Rather, the current opposition leaders may be coming to the end of their careers. Despite the success of the opposition parties in the parliamentary elections, senior figures of Russia's systemic opposition were subsequently heavily defeated in the presidential elections. Going forward, the leaders of the opposition parties are likely to face internal politicking as other figures attempt to replace them and begin laying the groundwork for the next presidential elections scheduled for 2018. There are indications that movement in this direction has already begun. Gennady Zyuganov, who will be seventy-two at the time of the next election, may be difficult to unseat from his post at the helm of the Communist Party, but it appears that some have already suggested Sergei Udaltsov of the Rot Front as a possible successor (though this suggestion was quickly denied by a member of the KPRF who stated that Udaltsov is not even a KPRF member). Given the success of the Just Russia Party in the parliamentary elections and the party's candidate Sergei Mironov's rather weak performance in the presidential elections, it may be that he also faces a challenge. That challenge may perhaps come from within the party, although Udaltsov has been mentioned as a possible leader

Similarly, the leaders of the liberal nonsystemic opposition may find themselves under pressure. Grigory Yavlinsky and Boris Nemtsov, for instance, may be among those in the liberal camp who find themselves pressured from within their own party groups—and as other political elements of a more liberal agenda take shape—for not having delivered an electable agenda. Political pressure alone does not account for their inability to forge a coherent political platform, and they may face internal competition from younger members of the political Right.

Who are the nonsystemic opposition “newcomers”? Some, such as Sergei Udaltsov and Alexei Navalny, who, despite perhaps somewhat questionable agendas, have rather seduced observers in the West, becoming darlings of the opposition movement. They are not so much “newcomers” as previously ignored—Navalny, for instance, though often considered to be a “blogger and activist,” is a man with a political career of some ten years behind him. This would also include those who might not immediately appear to be politically important, such as Ksenia Sobchak. Until very recently, Sobchak, the daughter of Anatoliy Sobchak, formerly mayor of St. Petersburg and for whom Vladimir Putin worked, was known best as “Russia’s Paris Hilton,” a celebrity who presented Russia’s version of the television series “Big Brother.” It is only since December that she has emerged as a more political figure, and given the close relationship between Putin and her father, the nature of her own relationship with Russia’s president-elect is an interesting question.

Additionally, new groups and parties are likely to emerge, especially given the new legislation on registering parties. How Dmitri Rogozin uses his new position back in Moscow will be important to monitor. Although he holds a busy portfolio, he will likely play an important role in political debates. Another example may be the party that Mikhail Prokhorov has stated he will establish (a party “without a political agenda,” he claims). It is worth remembering the proposal made by Vladislav Surkov in the wake of the elections in early December that a party should be created to soak up urban discontent. It seems likely that this could be the central aim of Prokhorov’s new party—and in so doing, he would have the blessing of the leadership.

Indeed, Mikhail Prokhorov is another who is considered by some to be a “new face” in Russian politics, despite long being a senior figure in Russian business. Here, it seems that the failed effort to invigorate the *Pravoe Delo* Party in 2011 and the time between Prokhorov’s removal from the position of party head and his decision to run in the presidential campaign would benefit from deeper consideration. More sophisticated conclusions than those that he was fired from *Pravoe Delo* by the Kremlin intrigue for being “too independent” are necessary.

Though the opposition is fractured in many ways, Putin’s leadership will continue to struggle with various “opponents.” The left-leaning parties represented in parliament will offer some opposition—while this may in sum be

limited, it has already become visible, for instance when the Left's bloc in parliament opposed the appointment of Medvedev as prime minister. Perhaps more importantly, the leadership still faces numerous practical difficulties in having its agenda implemented. These problems range from insufficient or decrepit infrastructure across the country to societal and political problems, such as corruption and the difficulties the authorities face in having their instructions put into practice. Indeed, it might be argued that this is the real opposition Putin's leadership team faces. In one telling pre-election poll, when presented with all candidates and questioned about who could deal with the problems Russia faces, Putin was the only candidate to enter double digits. He received 14 percent.

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Notes

- 1 See, among many, D. Satter, *Russia's Looming Crisis* (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 2012); L. Jonson, *The Post Putin Era Has Started*, RUFS Briefing no. 11, February 2012; P. Hanson, J. Nixey, L. Shevtsova, and A. Wood, *Putin Again: Implications for Russia and the West*, Chatham House Report, February 2012; "The Beginning of the End," *Economist*, March 3, 2012; L. Aron, "Putin is Already Dead," *Foreign Policy*, February 7, 2012.
- 2 In the previous parliament, United Russia had chaired 26 of 32 committees.
- 3 In Rostov, maximum turnout on December 10 was 300 and on December 24 it was 1,200; in Tambov there was no demonstration on December 10, while 1,000 turned out on December 24; in Krasnodar some 200 turned out on December 10 and 1,000 on December 24.
- 4 In St. Petersburg, 7,000 turned out on December 10, 3,000 on December 24; in Novosibirsk 8,000 demonstrated on December 10, and 2,000 on December 24. In Ufa attendance fell from 1,000 to a maximum of 200.
- 5 Prior to joining United Russia, the forty-eight-year-old Volodin was a Duma deputy in the Fatherland-All Russia bloc. He became head of the Fatherland-All Russia bloc in September 2001. In December 2001, Fatherland-All Russia Party merged with Unity to form United Russia, and Volodin's rise to the top of that party has been steady. In October 2010, he was appointed deputy prime minister, as part of his role as chief of staff of the Russian government.
- 6 Govorukhin has long been a member of parliament and is known for directing popular films such as *Vertikal* and *Mesto vstrechi izmenit nelzya*. For more on Govorukhin, see www.govoruhin.ru/index.htm.
- 7 For one English language overview assessment of the articles, see K. Pynnoniemi, "Putin's plans lack plausibility," FIIA Comment, 03/12, February 2012, www.fiaa.fi/en/publication/245/putin_s_plans_lack_plausibility.
- 8 Some reports suggested, for instance, that the well-known actress Chulpan Khamatova was pressured into supporting the campaign with a video on why she would vote for him.
- 9 It was as a result of the "color revolutions," particularly in Ukraine, that the Russian leadership sought to develop the concept of "sovereign democracy" and began to establish youth groups such as "Nashi" that could be mobilized in case of a similar situation developing in Russia.

- 10 Medvedev's appointment passed through parliament, with 299 votes for, 144 against. He was broadly supported by United Russia and the LDPR and opposed by the KPRF and Just Russia.
- 11 Govorun was until September 2011 Surkov's deputy in the Presidential Administration, holding the position of head of department for internal policy. In September, he was appointed presidential plenipotentiary to the Central Federal District.

About the Author

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