

Restless Russia

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Abstract

This paper attempts to investigate how and why after a twelve-years period of stability Putinist social contract seemingly broke down and Russia stepped into a new period of uncertainty and crisis. The author underlines that, unwillingly, Medvedev's presidency paved the way for the protests from the winter of 2011-2012 and fostered the regime's crisis of legitimacy. Specifically, Medvedev's relatively liberal rhetoric led to rising expectations among the 'winners' of first Putin-Medvedev era and to a growing gap between rhetoric and delivery. Moreover, the 'Putin consensus' was also fraying from below during the 2000s, given the population's fading memory about the 1990s, flourishing of corruption, and migration becoming a hot issue in a booming economy and collapsing native demographics of Russian society. Finally, Putin made several crucial tactical mistakes in the run-up to the Duma elections of the 2011, failing to provide a coherent narrative for the elections, loosing some leading manipulators of the political system, and ousting some powerful regional bosses that ran powerful local machines which traditionally delivered the vote.

Introduction

In a few short months over the winter of 2011-12 Russia shot from a situation in which any dissent could be controlled – two people standing together in public could be treated as an 'unsanctioned public meeting' – to one where almost anything could spark off protests. In December 2011 hundreds of thousands overcame the fear factor to protest against fraud in the elections to the Russian parliament (Duma). In February organisers overcame the winter hiatus and the extreme cold to mobilise similar numbers, and added several of the carnivalesque elements that had been a key features of the 'coloured revolutions' of the mid-2000s, which the Putinist system thought it had successfully immunised Russia against.

But the size of the demonstrations masked a proliferation of demands, as many different movements came together simultaneously but failed to coalesce. The motley opposition took (some) advantage of a crisis they did not create; but the crisis itself was driven by the strategic weakening of the Putinist system. The opposition was not about to take power; in fact it did not even take part in the elections. Putin eventually stumbled over the finish line, so it was not yet clear just how weak the system had become. But Russia was clearly entering a profound period of uncertainty – along with the rest of the world, but with the extra local flavour of twelve years of the Putinist social contract - of 'stability after chaos' and prosperity instead of participation - having seemingly broken down.

Medvedev's Legacy

Dmitry Medvedev achieved relatively little as President. Prime Minister Putin didn't allow him to create his own team. Medvedev couldn't even replace his Chief of Staff Sergey Naryshkin, a 'minder' appointed by Putin, with one of the few 'Medvedists' Justice Minister Aleksandr Kononov. Medvedev had no party: attempts to split a liberal wing off United Russia were frustrated. And Medvedev had few allies. His natural support base was in the SME sector, but he failed to build alliances with Russia's all-important oligarchs. A last-minute appeal to them in September 2011 was met with silence.¹ Medvedev also clashed with apparent natural allies like the powerful liberal finance minister Aleksey Kudrin. Medvedev was not good at economics, or even administration, and Kudrin saw Medvedev's last-minute boost to military spending in 2011 as economically reckless and a blatant attempt to win oligarchic friends in the notoriously corrupt military-industrial sector, which Medvedev had previously campaigned to clean up.

But Medvedev still wanted a second term, and he had done enough to make that prospect a threat to 'Putin's friends', the new Russian oligarchs from St. Petersburg and the security services who have taken over large swathes of the Russian economy since the Yukos affair in 2003, and continued to expand their empires under Medvedev's passive presidency. They therefore demanded Putin's return.

Yet, in many ironic ways Medvedev's presidency paved the way for the protests in 2011-12. Most obviously, his relatively liberal rhetoric led to rising expectations – and to a growing gap between rhetoric and delivery. Medvedev talked a lot and achieved little; but he had a positive effect on the climate of ideas, often mediated by the new media that Medvedev also patronised like *Dozhd'* and *Afisha*, which in turn fed these ideas out into new opposition circles. A 'modernisation' agenda emerged once Russia had survived the immediate shock of the recession in 2008-09. Action may have been blocked by conservatives, much like Soviet Prime Minister Kosygin had his economic reform plans blocked in 1965 by the Brezhnev group during an earlier period of rule by tandem (or troika); but Medvedev at least defined an agenda for reform, and others have taken that agenda to heart.

Ironically, the Medvedev presidency had originally been a prosperity project. When it was devised in 2007, the assumption was that he would front the international legitimatisation of the regime, just as, in the Kremlin's view, Putin had legitimised it at home. Medvedev would make the world safe for the Russian elite. However, that world changed after the global economic crisis in 2008. The

¹ Interview with Yevgeniy Gontmakher, Moscow, 6 February 2012.



Russian economy collapsed by -7.9% in 2009. It recovered thereafter: real GDP grew by a cumulative 70% under Putin's presidency in 2000-08, then by 4.2% in 2010 and 4.3% in 2011. Nevertheless, growth did not make the regime stronger as the next election cycle approached. If the main differentiation in Russian society in 2000 was between the super-rich and the rest: by 2011 new middle strata had emerged, which various estimates put at up to 30% of the population. It was not like the 'Middle Classes' in the West, based in the security of property and the professions, but in some ways it had more disposable income – Russians are not burdened by too much mortgage debt (apartment privatisation having been one of the unsung successes of the 1990s), and income tax is a low 13%. These 'winners' of the first Putin-Medvedev era wanted to consolidate their gains.

Meanwhile, the 'Putin consensus' was also fraying from below,² as the Medvedev Presidency unwittingly undermined its key pillars. The 'anarchic' 1990s became a fading memory; corruption worsened dramatically because there was more to steal, maintaining the integrity of the Russian Federation in the North Caucasus came to be seen as more of a liability than strength to many, and migration became a hot issue as a booming economy and collapsing native demographics led to it stretching the 'absorption capacity' of Russian society. On Chechnya a new type of Russian nationalism emerged which inverted Putin's rhetoric of success with the slogan 'stop feeding the Caucasus.'³ Economically, Russia managed a soft landing in 2008-09, but psychologically was hit hard. Russia now found it harder to depict itself as a rising power.⁴ Finally, according to Gleb Pavlovsky, 'the vertical of power never existed: it was only ever a vertical of loyalty.'⁵ There was no 'vertical of administration.' The bureaucracy was treated like an army, and was given too many orders.⁶ "Governors demonstrate their loyalty, but are masters in their own fief, controlling all business, police and local media on their territory."⁷ The result was a crisis of implementation. Even Putin himself said at the Valday Club in November 2011 that '80%' of presidential decrees were not implemented by the regions.⁸

² Ivan Krastev, Mark Leonard and Andrew Wilson (eds.), "What Does Russia Think?" (ECFR Report no. 16, 2009). http://ecfr.eu/content/entry/what_does_russia_think

³ On the 'new' Russian nationalism, see Nicu Popescu, 'Russia's liberal-nationalist cocktail: elixir of life or toxic poison?', *Open Democracy*, 3 February 2012, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/nicu-popescu/elixir-of-life-or-toxic-poison-russias-liberal-nationalist-cocktail>

⁴ See Ben Judah, Jana Kobzova and Nicu Popescu, *Dealing with a Post-BRIC Russia* (ECFR Report no. 44, November 2011), www.ecfr.eu/content/entry/dealing_with_a_post_bric_russia

⁵ Interview with Gleb Pavlovsky, Moscow, 4 February 2012.

⁶ Interview with Konstantin Sonin, Moscow, 7 February 2012.

⁷ Interview with Yevgeniy Gontmakher, Moscow, 6 February 2012.

⁸ David Hearst, 'Putin: we have lost Russia's trust', *The Guardian*, 12 November 2011.

As a result, an imminent ‘legitimacy crisis’ was first predicted in a report by Mikhail Dmitriev of the Centre for Strategic Research in the spring of 2011,⁹ and in a joint article by Igor Yurgens and Yevgeniy Gontmakher of the Institute of Contemporary Development in July 2011.¹⁰ But Putin put other considerations first. In the West, ‘third term syndrome’ is when leaders get tired and complacent, can no longer run against their predecessors but find it difficult to reinvent themselves, and begin to make mistakes. Putin’s problems weren’t necessarily electoral, but he was definitely showing signs of being in office for too long.

Putin’s Tactical Mistakes

Putin made several crucial tactical mistakes in the run-up to the Duma elections. Most obviously this was the ‘castling’ manoeuvre, simply announcing that he would swap places with Medvedev without consultation with the public on 24 September. Putin lazily failed to provide a convincing story as to why he had to return. The new Right Cause party that briefly flared in the Summer of 2011 might have done so. It was less important as a political project – it was a puppet party that fell victim to puppet politics as its leader grew too ambitious and rowed with Kremlin master puppeteer Vladislav Surkov – but it was a vehicle for reform ideas from Kudrin and some crossover Medvedites. It might even ironically have served as the basis for the argument that the powerful Putin could deliver the real reform that the powerless Medvedev could not; but the project crashed and burnt; and Plan A for a ‘sophisticated election campaign’ suddenly became Plan B – victory by cruder methods.¹¹

Not only was there no narrative for the election, there were no diversions either. In past elections, the Russian system has been dependent on the creation of a ‘dramaturgiia’ to steamroller victory. In 1996 this was Yeltsin versus the Communists, in his first election in 2000 it was Putin versus the Chechens, in 2004 Putin versus the oligarchs, and ‘operation successor’ when he handed over to Medvedev in 2008. The absence of a convincing narrative this time made the elections a referendum on a suddenly exposed United Russia. The alternative ‘Popular Front’ project failed to fly, and only served to further emphasise the dysfunctionality of United Russia.

The result was that the main ‘party of power’ won less than half of the vote even on the inflated official figures, with United Russia on 49.3%, down from 64.3% at the last Duma elections in 2007. Russia has been fixing elections for

⁹ The report can be found at http://csis.org/files/attachments/110330_CSR_Political%20Crisis%20in%20Russia.pdf

¹⁰ *Vedomosti*, 27 July 2011.

¹¹ Interview with Nikolay Petrov, London, 18 January 2012.



years, but not without a cover story, so suddenly the fraud was an insult to the identity of the 'new Russia,' especially because it was over-dependent on the crudest of crude fraud in 'controlled regions' like Chechnya.

And Putin's declining clout could not mask the problem, because the system was over-using what was once its strongest asset. According to Konstantin Sonin, "Putin's PR over-reached in the last three years. He was on TV too much, talking about everything from culture to sport."¹² By brusquely sidelining Medvedev, Putin exposed how over-dependent the system was on him personally, at a time when his personal magic was beginning to weaken.

A system held together by smoke and mirrors and political chicanery also lost its leading manipulators in 2011. Vladislav Surkov was the creator of 'sovereign democracy,' the man informally in charge of controlling every piece on the Russian political chessboard – both sides, black and white. Still both he and Russia's leading 'political technologist' Gleb Pavlovsky came to back Medvedev, perhaps because they sensed that their old boss was becoming a harder sell. Surkov also took the blame for United Russia's declining political effectiveness, and lost out to Putinist 'enforcer' Vyacheslav Volodin who was put in charge of the rival Popular Front project – though this also failed to establish a clear existential reason for its existence. Surkov was seemingly sacrificed after the Duma elections; but Putin's political system that relied on 'managed democracy' rather than full-blown authoritarianism needed "Surkov's stability [which] depended on theatre and spectacle." Once he was gone, says Simon Kordonsky, "the mechanism for creating the drama wasn't there." "Without him, there is no mechanism for stability. Volodin is trying to build a new stability. We're living in an interregnum."¹³ Most of Surkov's team went too. In Yevgeniy Gontmakher's words, "only technical persons are left working with Putin."¹⁴

The purge of powerful regional governors over the two years before the elections also had paradoxical effects. Long-time Moscow Mayor Yuriy Luzhkov was ousted in 2010, as were other powerful local bosses like Mintimer Shaymyev in Tatarstan and Murtaza Rakhimov in Bashkortostan. But they all ran powerful local machines which traditionally delivered the vote in return for the Kremlin turning a blind eye to whatever they did in their local fiefdoms. According to Russia's leading election analyst Aleksandr Kynev, their removal led to reduced Kremlin control over around 40 million voters; whereas the areas where it managed to tighten its grip before the elections counted for only 10-12 million voters, and 40 million voters were already relatively free. The most obvious loss

¹² Interview with Konstantin Sonin, Moscow, 7 February 2012.

¹³ Interview with Simon Kordonsky, Moscow, 5 February 2012.

¹⁴ Interview with Yevgeniy Gontmakher, Moscow, 6 February 2012.

was Moscow where before 2010 “Luzhkov ran a well-oiled machine directed by clear signals from the top,” but in December 2011 observers exposed “school teachers fixing the vote.”¹⁵

The Protest Movement

The Duma vote was first followed by ‘informal’ protests on 5 December, but they were big enough to encourage a completely new category of mass demonstrations on 10 and 24 December and on 4 February 2012. This was not Russia’s ‘coloured revolution’ nor some local equivalent of the Arab Spring, but many of the same technologies were used; most notably building crowds on Facebook and using smart phones to video voting fraud then post it on the web and circulate it through social media.

However, the protests were actually several movements appearing at once, which were not coalescing particularly well. Medvedev’s electorate, the new middle class and metropolitan hipsters, was strongly present, but so were the ‘old’ opposition of 1990s liberals like Boris Nemtsov and Garry Kasparov. The two wings did not get along. The new ‘anti-Caucasian’ nationalists, like the Russian Social Movement and Russian Civic Union, rubbed along uneasily with noisier ‘old’ style nationalists. The old Communists were joined by the ‘new’ left like Sergey Udaltsov. There were activists from new NGOs like the Khimki forest movement. None were individually in charge: the protests drew most of their strength and numbers from the previously apolitical.

Differences of approach were already apparent by February. While some sought to maintain a civic front, Kudrin, who posed as go-between the demonstrators and the Kremlin, claimed “we have nothing in common with the left and nationalists other than clean elections.”¹⁶ Kasparov et al returned to over-prominence though more mainstream media. Star blogger and online anti-corruption activist Aleksey Navalny lost a certain amount of momentum by giving a wild speech on 24 December and then bizarrely taking a holiday in Mexico. The much-vaunted network activists were not crossing over into the political world: according to one critic, “All Navalny’s mobilisation is via the internet.”¹⁷ The many-headed opposition already seemed to have reached its mobilisation limits on 4 February. Putin complained that the nihilistic opposition’s only purpose was to delegitimise the system while offering no concrete programme of its own, which wasn’t too far from the truth.

¹⁵ Interview with Vladimir Milov, Moscow, 7 February 2012.

¹⁶ See http://neye.ru/2012/news/kudrin_said_with_whom.html

¹⁷ Interview with Konstantin von Eggert, Moscow, 7 February 2012.



The opposition's programme was certainly unclear: the slogan 'For Fair Elections' included contradictory demands for a recount of the Duma vote and for new elections. The first demonstrations contained almost no demands concerning the conduct of the upcoming presidential election in March. Some argued the opposition was out of practice; as it had stayed too long in a marginal corner.¹⁸ But behind the scenes Navalny was working to build a new team, a brains trust or "collective Surkov." The main issue was how to cut out the old liberals like Nemtsov and Kasparov who were free-riding on the Facebook activists, and build a core Navalny team capable of mounting a broader challenge one or two years after the presidential election.

Putin's Grab-Bag Victory

It was clearly difficult for Putin to adjust to an atmosphere of distrust. Yet some of his fight back after the first protests in December had traction. His flippant abuse of the opposition was often counter-productive, but his line about "latte-drinking Moscow liberals versus the real Russia" was based on a 'defensive mobilisation' strategy that did just enough to get him across the finishing line. The old 'Putin majority' was 70-70 – both in terms of percentage of vote and turnout. By contrast the Kremlin was able to do enough to mobilise a reduced 'Putin plurality' of 50-50, which still responded sufficiently to old themes: no return to the 'chaos' of the 1990s, the threat of coloured revolution (see <http://anti-orange.ru>) and anti-Americanism, despite the risk of making Putin look even more like yesterday's man, recycling old tropes.

On the other hand, the Kremlin was still stuck in the old paradigm of 'managed,' i.e. manipulated, democracy. In the words of Konstantin Sonin, "the Kremlin thinks it's the TV message that matters...they think they can carry on with fraud and keep a lid on protests with media messages, and 'anti-orange' politics." "But it's the actual vote that matters; it's the actual fraud that puts people on the streets. There is still too much emphasis on saying things rather than changing things. Putin is too far from the median voter and can't just close the gap with PR."¹⁹

Nevertheless, Putin's strategy to win in round one to show the protests were an aberration was a success. He claimed 63.6% on a 65% turnout. His real vote and the real turnout were probably over 50%, but only just. The extra was an 'average' 10% of fraud, which was probably a good call. Any more would have revived large-scale protests. Any less was impossible: it was too late to dismantle the system; fraud was inbuilt, particularly in the 'controlled regions.'

¹⁸ Interview with Vladimir Milov, Moscow, 7 February 2012.

¹⁹ Interview with Konstantin Sonin, Moscow, 7 February 2012.

But ‘political technology’ was also in-built: Putin’s ‘victory’ was a function of his lack of real opposition. Grigoriy Yavlinsky was excluded as a candidate for the presidential election because his Yabloko party had done relatively well in the December Duma vote. Billionaire businessman Mikhail Prokhorov was inserted into the race as a ‘liberal’ alternative, but was widely assumed to be a Kremlin puppet.

Some of Putin’s efforts to win in round one were also counter-productive, particularly “the administrative mobilisation of state workers,”²⁰ and using migrants from Central Asia at pro-Putin rallies, whose spoken Russian was often poor. After the humiliation of being booed at the Moscow martial arts event in November 2011, Putin was clearly over-compensating and only appeared at carefully staged-managed public events – the only purpose of which seemed to be outnumbering the opposition rallies, even though they were dull and lifeless. The pro-Kremlin youth group Nashi, on the other hand, the shock troops that were supposed to surround the Kremlin, proved irrelevant – for now at least. In fact, they were exposed in leaked e-mails as embodying the same faults as the Putinist system, out of touch and corrupt, with leader Vasiliy Yakomenko trying to buy apartments worth 30 million rubles²¹.

The motley opposition, mainly the Navlany core, created new organisations like RosVybory, which registered thousands of monitors online to observe the poll.²² But post-election protests were muted. The fake opposition parties in the tame Duma that had joined the February demonstrations stayed away after the election in March. It was Udaltsov’s turn to act rashly and provoke police reaction by staying in the square after the main rally on 5 March.

The opposition was always stuck in the paradox that it was not able to contest the election. Unlike during the ‘coloured revolutions,’ especially in Ukraine in 2004, it was not able to claim that it had actually won. Ongoing protest was promised between the election and the inauguration on 4 May, when the weather would be better. But it seemed likely that Putin could ride even this out: according to one source, “Putin is only in danger if he creates his own Gongadze,”²³ i.e. creates a cause célèbre for opposition to rally around. The opposition continued to hope for a second spark – some police brutality, a terrorist incident, the *mazhory* (children of the elite) flouting the law. There was uncoordinated talk of copying Ukraine in 2004 with a tent city in central Moscow, a so-called ‘maidan.ru.’ It would have to be manned by hard-core

²⁰ Interview with Vladimir Milov, Moscow, 7 February 2012.

²¹ Jonathan Earle, ‘Youth Group Leader in Leak Scandal’, *The Moscow Times*, 3 February 2012.

²² See the figures at www.rosvybory.org/stats

²³ Interview with Mikhail Delyagin, Moscow, 5 February 2012.



activists, its putative relationship to the broader protests was unclear, and it seemed likely to provoke confrontation with Putin's pride.

Restless Russia, Weak Regime: What Now?

Russia in 2012 was indeed more like Ukraine in 2001, when Leonid Kuchma was damaged by the protests over the Gongadze affair, but not forced out. The Russian regime could sit out the protests and crack down. But Russia already had a legitimacy crisis, so it did not want a governance crisis as well. A crackdown would do nothing to solve the first problem. When Putin first announced his return for another potential twelve years, critics talked of a 'new Brezhnev era' or a new 'time of stagnation,' meaning the population would be anesthetised with ongoing growth but fundamental structural problems would remain unsolved. Nonetheless, the new Russia promised to be much more restless than the quiescent Brezhnev era, with an active minority protesting against those very structural problems. Putin had to let the protestors blow off steam.

Yet "Putin is in a narrow corridor: he can be too liberal or too authoritarian." Many conservatives, even some nominal liberals, discussed their fears of Russia's Red Wheel, "the endless cycle of protest and revolution."²⁴ Nevertheless, three possible steps towards compromise were still discussed. First and least likely, Putin might dampen the protests by promising he would serve for only one more term. Second, a new coalition government was possible, though its likely contours were not encouraging. The opposition camp, as so often in Russian history, was split. So were its sub-camps. So was the government side; and so were the rival intermediaries between them all. Kudrin wouldn't work with Medvedev; Kudrin could head the new Presidential Administration, though deliberately creating a system of "antagonistic balance" carried obvious dangers. A new coalition government, "with a political surface," could be weak and short-term, and could see power being concentrated in the Presidential Administration, as in the 1990s.²⁵ After Putin sabotaged the 'tandem' it seemed unlikely Medvedev would survive long as Prime Minister, or even be appointed in the first place. There was talk of finding an alternative formula for "Medvedevism without Medvedev,"²⁶ such as making Prokhorov Deputy Prime Minister in charge of economic reforms, but he was widely distrusted and was "a businessman, not a politician or a minister."²⁷ Another possible scenario was Putin reprising the role of the 'Russian Pinochet' he had played once before in 2000-03 – combining

²⁴ Interview with Olga Khrystyanovskaya, Moscow, 6 February 2012.

²⁵ Interview with Yevgeniy Gontmakher, Moscow, 6 February 2012.

²⁶ Interview with Aleksandr Morozov, Moscow, 4 February 2012.

²⁷ Interview with Konstantin von Eggert, Moscow, 7 February 2012.

authoritarian politics with liberal reforms in the economy, although he was too long in the tooth to play it again.

The third and surprisingly likely concession was pre-term elections for a new Duma in 2014. This would build on the reforms announced by Medvedev in December 2011. It would channel the opposition's energies into party-building and it would allow the elite to carry on in the same groove, trying to create artificial parties from above. The erosion of monopoly politics was happening fast, as was the taboo on presidential ambition,²⁸ with Kudrin, Sergey Ivanov who was passed over for Medvedev in 2008, and Dmitry Rogozin a statist nationalist who could blunt the rise of the likes of Navalny, all now openly jockeying for position. As is often said in Russia, "the real opposition is close to the leader."²⁹ All were part of the Kremlin elite, but cracks were beginning to appear, and in Russia "every politician is a puppet who became real: in non-democratic systems it's hard to tell."³⁰ Everyone was hedging their bets; the boundary between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' were becoming blurred. All classic signs, if not yet of the end of the regime, then certainly of the regime's old age.

For all that, neither Putin nor Medvedev had their own party, at least not yet. United Russia seemed fatally damaged, with the Kremlin likely to revive plans to split it into various parts after the presidential election. Meanwhile, "nobody knows who the party leader is." People were "waiting for a signal from above... as the centre of decision-making lies outside the party, in the Kremlin."³¹ Even the previously fake "Duma parties" might have to compete to survive. But there were also plenty of new projects on the horizon, including a new nationalist party 'New Force.'

This future scenario of a slightly more democratic Russia would not be the liberal dream of the 1990s. It will be closer to the median Russian voter – left of centre, and even, according to Vladimir Milov, left-populist.³² and mixed with the 'new' nationalism. That would most likely mean fewer foreign adventures and two to three years of internal focus. Then again, it might also mean, as one of the demonstrations' more paradoxical slogans had it, "Rossiia bez Puti" ('Russia without Put' – a play on Putin's name, but meaning 'Russia without a direction' or 'path').

²⁸ Interview with Gleb Pavlovsky, 4 February 2012.

²⁹ Interview with Konstantin Sonin, Moscow, 7 February 2012.

³⁰ Interview with Konstantin Sonin, Moscow, 7 February 2012.

³¹ Interview with Olga Khrystyanovskaya, Moscow, 6 February 2012.

³² See http://slon.ru/russia/levyy_povorot_neizbezhen_no_eto_ne_prichina_ostavit_putina_u_vlasti-736039.xhtml