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Putinism Under Siege

IMPLOSION, ATROPHY, OR REVOLUTION?

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The wave of mass protest set off by Russia's December 2011 parliamentary and March 2012 presidential elections has put an end to the postcommunist status quo. The agony of Vladimir Putin's regime is apparent, but we do not yet know if the death knell has sounded for the "Russian system." This system, based on personal rule, the merger of political power with economic assets, and a statist-militarist model of self-perpetuating authority, might be finished. But it also may be the case that Russian society still has a long way to go before it can be said to have broken with this stubborn legacy of an authoritarian past.

Moreover, what exactly will replace the system of personalized power? And will this replacement, whatever it is, appear on the scene *before* that system starts to unravel? No one can say. We can be certain, however, that Russia's transformation will come only when its citizens bring sufficient pressure to bear, and also that Russia's trajectory will have implications not only for the international order but for democratic prospects throughout the post-Soviet space.

The normally placid surface of Russian political life erupted in turmoil on 5 December 2011, when outraged citizens took to the streets of large cities across the country to protest the previous day's balloting to fill the State Duma's 450 seats. Thus began three months of open rebellion against the authorities. The "December Movement" began as a spontaneous public response to election fraud that favored the Kremlin-aligned United Russia party (which is less a party than a bureaucrats' union).¹ Even absent manipulation of the vote count, the parliamentary elections fell short of being free and fair: Some opposition parties

were denied registration and barred from taking part. Others, such as Yabloko, were registered but then were denied the opportunity to run full-fledged campaigns. Officially, United Russia won 49.3 percent of the vote and 238 seats while the Communists received 19.2 percent (92 seats), the Just Russia party took 13.2 percent (64 seats), and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's far-right Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) won 11.7 percent and 56 seats. But independent experts have proved that, in reality, the Kremlin party's vote share could not possibly have been more than 35 percent.²

The outbreak of mass protests against vote fraud did not change the Kremlin's approach to elections. A system based on "uncertain rules but certain outcomes" cannot allow genuine competition. The March 2012 presidential election, which returned Putin to the top spot after a stint as prime minister, drove this point home. The Kremlin itself chose Putin's opponents and barred any potentially dangerous rivals from the race. Two of the handpicked contenders (Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov and Zhirinovskiy) have been constant Kremlin sparring partners since Yeltsin's days. Another, Sergei Mironov of the Just Russia party, has been a Putin ally for years. As for oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov, he was hardly likely to have risked entering the race without the Kremlin's seal of approval—all the more so with imprisoned Mikhail Khodorkovskiy as an example of what happens to oligarchs who dare to show real independence.

These handpicked opponents were supposed to give Putin the appearance of engaging in a political struggle that would legitimize his "victory" and continued rule. Putin himself made use of his status as premier to exploit a panoply of state resources ranging from television time to financial carrots and repressive sticks with which to bribe or intimidate voters. Putin officially won 63.6 percent, though again there was widespread fraud. Independent sources calculate that he actually won around 46 percent overall, and as little as 40 percent in Moscow.³

The mass discontent shocked the Kremlin, which at first stuck to its usual harsh tactics. Police broke up the December 5 demonstration and none too gently arrested hundreds of protesters. But instead of putting out the fire, the tough response only fueled it. Surprised observers, Russian and foreign alike, realized that educated urbanites were thoroughly alienated from their government. A system that had seemed stable and resilient now stood revealed as more fragile and brittle than many had thought.⁴

The dates of the largest protests were December 10 and 24, February 4, and March 5 and 10. The numbers did not reach the record levels of 1990–91, when up to half a million people took to the streets of Moscow, but getting 70,000 to 120,000 people at a rally was a real turnaround after two decades of somnolence. "Angry citizens" began branching out into picketing, staging automobile protests along major

streets in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and (in a tactic borrowed from the Baltic-state independence activists of the 1980s) forming human chains.

Their main call was “For Honest Elections!”—a slogan meant to unite people from various political currents, including nationalists. The demonstrations’ leaders, chosen through online voting, listed five demands: 1) free all political prisoners; 2) dismiss Central Election Commission head Vladimir Churov and investigate all claims of vote fraud; 3) annul all results found to be fraudulent; 4) register opposition parties; and 5) hold new parliamentary elections. Subsequent rallies added new demands for “comprehensive political reform” and independent monitors for the presidential polling.

Initially, these new Decembrists stopped short of bringing up the system’s cornerstone—the executive monopoly on power cemented in the 1993 Constitution—and contented themselves with demanding honest rules of the game within the personalized-power framework. Things soon took a deeper turn, however, and protesters began denouncing Putin’s regime itself. The growing demands for fundamental reform signaled that the movement was increasingly turning against the system, and that Russian society was coming to grasp the need for sweeping change at the level of first principles.

The mass anger overturned the image of an apathetic and demoralized Russian society. The Decemberist Movement’s base is broad, and includes a wide range of discontented urban residents across various income levels, age groups, and political orientations. The protesters are not exclusively middle class, but they are well educated (70 percent are postsecondary graduates).⁵ Putin’s regime, it seems, has antagonized what might be called the most advanced or “modern” part of Russian society, thus ending its hopes for “top-down” modernization.

Causes and Impetus

Was it election fraud alone that sparked the protests? There have been falsified elections before in post-Soviet Russia—under Boris Yeltsin, during Putin’s first two terms as president, and under Dmitri Medvedev. Yet none led to mass opposition. We need to separate the protests’ causes from their catalysts. Discontent with Putin’s regime among educated urbanites has been building for some time as people have witnessed the cynicism, brazen corruption, official high-handedness, and general stasis on display in their government. By the last part of Putin’s second term (between 2006 and 2008), the foundations of his implicit deal with the country were starting to erode. The most active and dynamic sectors of society wanted more than the Kremlin’s offer of stability based on looking to the past and staying within the narrow bounds of old myths about Russia and the world. People began to tire of the notion that they should be content so long as the authorities let them make a

living in return for staying out of politics and recognizing the authorities as having the final say on questions of property ownership, making corruption an essential lubricant when frictions appeared.

For all the talk of modernization under Medvedev's presidency, corruption only strengthened its hold and the rot ate deeper into the system, further spreading public awareness that the country was at a dead end.

But there inevitably came a moment when Putin's formula for "social peace" no longer satisfied much of the populace. Too many had come to see that this pact could guarantee them neither opportunity nor prosperity nor even basic security. Moreover, Putin lacked any sense of the kinds of social improvements that might give young people a leg-up in life and a chance to better themselves. The financial and economic crisis of 2008—and the way that Putin and his team reacted to it by guarding their own wealth and that of the oligarchs close to them—cast into

especially high relief the flaws in Putin's model.

For all the talk of modernization under Medvedev's presidency, corruption only strengthened its hold and the rot ate deeper into the system, further spreading public awareness that the country was at a dead end, its rulers unable to undertake genuine change. Medvedev's legacy looks much like that of Leonid Brezhnev, who ruled the USSR from 1964 till his death in 1982. In Brezhnev's day, the gap between the leader's declarations and real life became so huge that it caused people fed up with double standards and cognitive dissonance to reject the Soviet system root and branch.

Two other circumstances also played a part in fueling the mood of hostility to the regime that was taking hold beneath the surface calm. The first was the new prominence of a younger generation that had grown up under Putin and was free of Soviet complexes, nostalgia, and fear. The second was the rise of the Internet. I recall my disappointment with young Russians during Putin's first decade in power, when I was struck by their conformism and desire to find places within the system at any cost. Unexpectedly, many members of this generation have chosen to take a fresh look at their lives and prospects. They have made the once-popular Putin an object first of mockery and more recently of open scorn.

As for the Internet, it not only made organizing protests easier, but also helped to shape an alternative view of the world and an alternative political culture. Millions of Russians who got news and information online began to see the government as an antagonist. With new media and other independent communication tools, they could build communities of opinion "outside" the control of the Russian state. All this mat-

tered, even though it soon became clear that online activism could never replace more traditional “real-world” forms of political participation.

The initial impetus for turning a mood of disaffection into action came on 24 September 2011, when Putin and Medvedev announced that they had been planning all along to swap jobs so that Putin, his seat kept warm by his younger confederate, could once again become president. For millions of Russians, this revelation that their country’s highest offices were being treated like someone’s personal playthings came as a slap in the face and a blow to national dignity. People hitherto silent decided that they could no longer hold their tongues. The fury that had been building up over time turned into readiness for open protest.

The authorities did not realize that the big cities had already grown weary of Putin and did not want to see him back in the Kremlin. The elections gave people the chance to take part in the authorized political process, and the accompanying fraud gave them grounds for openly and lawfully expressing their discontent. Worried about its legitimacy, the Kremlin could not simply break up the protests by force (though it would later do so when a new round of demonstrations broke out in May 2012).

Like the “Arab Spring” protests that began a year earlier, the Russian protests since late 2011 have manifested a strong ethical component as people demand that the state respect their rights and dignity as citizens. The Russian “drive for dignity” brought to the fore a new generation of civic leaders. These leaders have played an ambiguous role in the movement’s evolution. They have tried to keep the protests moderate-friendly by avoiding what they see as excessive politicization. (The first demonstrations’ ideological platform was so fuzzy that even a former cabinet minister and the head of a state-owned company took part.) The vague agenda may have helped to broaden the protests’ base, but at the cost of sapping their transformative potential. Moreover, open confrontation with the Kremlin will require a degree of courage and self-sacrifice for which civic leaders and many urban protesters do not seem ready.

Then too there are doubts about how far the Russian middle class wants to go in changing the system. A model of democratization associated with the work of Samuel P. Huntington posits that middle-class citizens become a force for greater self-rule and political liberty in authoritarian settings as their economic agency and prosperity grow. Things may not be so simple in Russia, where a sizeable swath of the middle class lives off its role as a service provider to the state bureaucracy or big state-run corporations such as Gazprom. For these middle-class Russians, protest may be less about transforming the system than about getting a better deal within it.

The protest movement’s desire to preserve its civic roots flows from the view, widespread in Russia, that politics is a dirty game. In some measure, the movement has been the result of frustration on the part of an opposition that can accurately be said to be outside or even against the

system. This “antisystem” opposition has failed to acquire a broad base of public support—not that building such a base would have been easy given Putin’s association with years of economic growth. Moreover, most of the antisystem opposition’s leaders are seen as relics from the unfondly remembered Yeltsin years, and their competing ambitions and inability to agree on a common program have kept them from becoming a powerful force. That said, these leaders and groups still deserve credit for keeping the embers of discontent burning through the difficult years of Putin’s clampdown. The Decemberist Movement’s ability to put its mechanisms in place so quickly was due above all to the antisystem opposition’s crucial involvement in the first rallies.

After the 4 March 2012 presidential election however, it became clear that the protest agenda was fizzling. The authorities failed to meet a single Decembrist demand. To continue taking to the streets with the same demands would have made no sense and would have only left the movement paralyzed when what it needed was to catch its breath.

A Movement’s Achievements—and Limits

We can draw several conclusions from the twenty-first century’s first Russian rebellion. First, the Decemberist Movement never had a chance to actually bring about a change of system or regime in Russia. There was no unified leadership or clear program, and, as we have seen, the appetite for politicization was missing. Yet in just a few months, the protests did change Russia’s political climate and marked the end of public indifference to politics. The mass dissent dealt a serious blow to the system of personalized power, shaking its foundations and speeding up its delegitimization. The protests saw old illusions and taboos begin to crumble, including the hope that the authorities grasped the need for change and were willing to pursue it. The protests showed that a new generation was taking the stage, a generation unwilling to live any longer in Putin’s stuffy outhouse. During the protests, this generation brought forth a core group of new leaders. They no longer have the traditional fear of the authorities in their blood, and they have the potential to raise a renewed round of popular protests to the next level.

Long used to an apathetic society and unprepared for any serious discontent, the Kremlin initially chose the worst possible way to react—it cracked down. Shocked and apparently confused, Putin made matters worse by calling the demonstrators insulting names. The authorities soon regained their composure and began damage control. With one hand, they targeted repression more carefully. With the other, they offered various handouts, sought to coopt opinion leaders and popular public figures by inviting them to meet with Putin and Medvedev or join regime-sponsored panels, and tried to split the opposition while

discrediting its leaders. These tactics were familiar, but the aggressiveness and desperation that were driving them were new. The authorities were frantically trying to save whatever was left of the system's rapidly waning legitimacy.

Putin's team decided to deemphasize force (which had been used more in the provinces anyway) in favor of a "soft-kill" approach that would wrap the Decembrist Movement in a suffocating official bear hug. Medvedev sent the Duma a package of cosmetic "liberalizing" bills with no prospect of jeopardizing the ruling team's tight grip on power.⁶ Authorities began parroting protest slogans, sending their own pro-Kremlin demonstrators—usually bussed-in state workers—into the streets to shout "For clean elections!" Every time the Decembrists put together an event, the Kremlin would immediately follow suit. If the opposition held an automobile protest, Putin's supporters would stage a pro-Kremlin version of the same thing. If the protesters filled a city square, they could be sure that the Kremlin would fill another square with an even greater number of its own supporters—most of whom were being paid for their participation.

Through it all, the Kremlin kept insisting that the Decembrists were foreign puppets and hirelings, paid by the West to foment another "color revolution," and that the regime's fight against them was in fact a noble struggle to preserve Russian honor and independence. Here, too, the Kremlin could not come up with anything new. As always in Russia, when the authorities feel pressed, they repeat the old "besieged fortress" refrain and launch a search for enemies at home and abroad. The main enemy in the Kremlin's eyes has been the supposedly U.S.-financed liberal opposition. The lack of evidence to support such claims has never bothered the ruling team. Its spin doctors seem to think that if this kind of propaganda worked in the past, it will work now—and all the more so since anti-Americanism fits with Putin's own views.

Western observers taken aback by Putin's new aggressiveness hastened to add reassuring notes, suggesting that one could not take the Kremlin's rhetoric at face value. Instead, it was all just part of an election campaign and would not keep Moscow from hewing to its usual pragmatic ways. But the reality is not so simple. With Putin and his team now watching their hold on power irreversibly slipping away as their legitimacy is undermined, the "besieged fortress" type of behavior becomes a key tool for trying to save not only the regime but the very system of personalized power.

The authorities' serious worry came through clearly in the Kremlin's decision to take the risky step—borrowed from Romania's Nicolae Ceaușescu and Ukraine's Viktor Yanukovich—of championing the provinces against the capital and using proregime provincials to intimidate dissenters. For Putin to rock the Russian boat himself like this is a sign of how limited the Kremlin's resources truly are. Trying

to maintain the status quo by doing things that could undermine stability smacks of desperation and does not seem like a winning long-run approach.

The Kremlin has fallen back on the statist-militarist paradigm that has kept Russia trapped for centuries under czars and commissars alike. Twenty years after the Soviet collapse, the Russian elite has not found a new means of governing. Instead, it is trying to prolong its hold on power by going back to battling imaginary enemies and fanning a climate of civil confrontation.

Yet the contradictions are striking. We are talking, after all, about a political elite that has integrated itself comfortably into a Western way of life while at the same time trying to keep its own country locked within a system that should have been junked long ago. The protest wave showed that this once seemingly effective means of simultaneously controlling society and projecting an image of belonging to Western civilization no longer works. The Kremlin has started to seek a new balance between anti-Western aggressiveness and its need to maintain the Western ties that make possible the comfortable lives of Russian elites. Whether the Kremlin succeeds in reaching a viable new equilibrium depends on how willing the West is to keep up its policy of tacit connivance with the Russian ruling team.

Too Late for Reform

In March 2012, the tide of protest seemed to subside. In its aftermath, Russian society appeared disoriented and confused as the authorities began to regain (at least on the surface) their customary air of self-assurance. The opposition camp was split over both what it had accomplished up to that point and what it should do next. The atmosphere of calm was deceptive, however. On May 6, thousands of Muscovites joined by visitors from other cities poured into the capital's streets to protest Putin's inauguration. This time, the authorities dispersed them with brutality, rounding up and detaining hundreds. For the first time, protesters fought with the police and invented new forms of resistance aimed at occupying city squares. A new and more antagonistic stage in the confrontation between the Kremlin and society had begun.

At first glance, one might get the impression that the system of personalized power can keep going. The commodities trade continues to pump money into state coffers. The elite reassures itself with the ideas that trouble is still a long way off and that protests can be met with crackdowns—and the elite's top members know that they can escape Russia in the event of a cataclysm. Squabbles and infighting threaten to consume the opposition. Nationalist antagonism toward non-Slavs (particularly internal migrants from the North Caucasus) seems as if it may provide a promising channel into which authorities can direct popular

passions, even if the Kremlin worries that the political exploitation of nationalism has its limits and may get out of hand.

Imperial nostalgia—still a force in some quarters—mitigates political discontent (Putin is a champion of Russia's claim to great-power status). So do Russian society's deep-seated atomization, demoralization, and degradation. All these are reflected in the loss of old cultural ties and the spread of social ills—signaled by high rates of alcoholism, abortion, murder, suicide, family breakdown, and early male mortality—that plague Russia and hold broad segments of Russian society back from activism on behalf of civic dignity. And there is also the sheer inertial weight of the huge and change-averse state bureaucracy.

We should not underrate the role that fear plays in the personalized-power system. The most vulnerable segments of society cling to the state and feel terror at the prospect of any change. Elites and intellectuals worry about a blind revolt from below even as they do things that make it more likely. Liberals fear that any real liberalization will lead to state collapse, much as Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* policy did. "Russia," they warn, "is just a smaller USSR." One must admit that this fear is not groundless: Russia remains a "half-frozen empire" that includes incompatible segments (Chechnya, for example) whose membership in the Russian Republic will not survive its liberalization. And yet, does not the Chechen example show that Russia has already effectively begun to lose territory even without liberalization?

Fearful, lacking new strategies, and unsure about the nature of political change and its implications, powerful entrenched interests in elite and intellectual circles are trying to convince themselves that the current regime might somehow become a force for change. Hence the argument is now being heard that "Putin 2.0" will find himself forced to carry out reform whether he wants to or not, and must therefore be supported. Yet if Putin is destined to become the transformer of Russian society, why did he not transform it earlier? Certainly, leaders can change course under pressure, but what Russia needs is the overturning of the entire personalized-power system, not just a course correction. So far, Russia's experience proves that reform "from the top" only makes the current autocracy more effective at holding transformation back. The Putin team's monopoly on power is the main source of the country's degradation. Only a transformative shift to fair and honest political competition can open the way to curing it. But will Putin step aside? And if he is ready for real change, why did he not start with a fair presidential election?

As for the idea, favored by some liberals, that economic modernization will eventually bring political liberalization in its wake, the authorities have been working on modernizing the economy for years, but with what results? Any notion of "modernization" that is understood to mean a strengthening of state control and monopoly power over the economy cannot by definition mean liberalization. And how can even the most

basic “economically rational” steps such as fighting corruption be taken when parliament has been turned into a circus and independent courts and media have been buried under thick layers of manipulation and intimidation? Sadly, however, “modernization from the top” remains popular among some deluded Russian liberals who seem fascinated by the idea of turning Russia into a colder version of Lee Kuan Yew’s Singapore.

Another myth dear to those who think the Russian *Titanic* can keep steaming along as usual is the belief in “gradual” reform. Supporters of the “gradual path” claim that reform should begin in selected areas such as education, healthcare, and agriculture, and only then spread further. But how do you reform these sectors without doing away with monopolies and opening them to competition, and without the rule of law and independent courts? The authorities’ monopoly on power makes any real reform impossible, even in these limited sectors.

The authorities’ tactical maneuvers and the myths spread by Kremlin propagandists can no longer stave off a crisis that has already begun. The alleged adaptability of the “Russian system” has been exposed as an illusion—cosmetic changes can no longer hide a more fundamental rigidity. The system guarantees Russians neither personal security, nor economic well-being, nor a sense of civic dignity. The system works only to satisfy entrenched interest groups at the expense of society at large; the “golden parachutes” that the elites maintain in the form of assets stored in the West prove that even they do not believe in the sustainability of the current political order. The paradox is that propping up the status quo is speeding up the system’s decline, but attempts to update this status quo without liquidating its basis (personalized power) threaten to cause system breakdown, not unlike what happened to communism in 1991. Yet a refusal to update—an embrace of stasis—will increase the threat of a sudden implosion. The Kremlin’s readiness to use violence could make this implosion bloody.

Putin’s return to the Kremlin shows that his team wants to hold on to its monopoly forever. As Medvedev himself declared, the team’s main instrument for resolving Russia’s problems is the decision “not to give up power” for the next ten to fifteen years at least. For the ruling team, relinquishing political control could mean not only loss of assets but also loss of freedom or even life. Lights burned late in the Kremlin during the Arab Spring and conclusions were drawn: Lose your grip on power, and you end up like Hosni Mubarak or Muammar Qadhafi. Russia’s current rulers do not want to become another variation on the theme of “authoritarians come to a bad end,” although the more tightly they hang on to the Kremlin, the more they make a hard landing not only probable but probably nasty too.

Questions remain: Can Russia as a nation-state survive even as the “Russian system” degenerates and breaks down? What price will ordi-

nary citizens be forced to pay? Will the state and the country fragment or somehow stay whole even as they are reborn? We may have answers to these questions sooner than we think.

The End of the Russian Matrix?

Looking at Russia in the wake of the postelection protests, one could have come away with the impression that the “normal” state of drowsy oblivion was settling over the country once again. People have behaved as if they accept Putin’s continued rule, at least by default: In a February 2012 poll by the Levada Center, only 14 percent of respondents said that they felt Putin had the “best solutions for Russia,” but 35 percent said that they felt no one had solutions.⁷ The May confrontations suggested that the silence could be the harbinger of a new and much more dangerous tsunami. Opinion is turning against Putin and the system of personalized rule. In a survey taken by the Levada Center in October 2011, around 68 percent of respondents were already saying that the interests of powerholders and society at large did not coincide, while only 24 percent said that they did.⁸ In a March 2012 survey, only 5 percent said that those in power “are concerned with the well-being of ordinary people.” Just 19 percent said that the authorities “are concerned with the interests of the country,” while 63 percent said that the authorities are concerned with their own interests, their desire to retain power, and the defense of major corporate interests. Only 23 percent had a positive view of the ruling team.⁹ In a late-December 2011 survey, about 61 percent were sure that 2012 would not be a calm year, and reported feelings of foreboding. Nearly 21 percent thought that Russia would experience a coup d’état, and 56 percent said that new turmoil was possible.¹⁰

The regime has already lost the support of key social groups and may lose yet more support as economic and fiscal problems mount. “No change and no stability” is a precarious situation for any leadership. And yet the regime’s final act could take some time and will require more than several waves of protest. There are still powerful groups at both the elite and popular levels with an interest in preserving the system in general and the Putin team’s rule in particular. These include not only business interests but also “system liberals” (who may have their issues with the system but who serve it at the same time) as well as the traditional Soviet industrial populace that relies on the state for survival.

If Putin’s personal grip on power is no longer sustainable, his cohort may agree on his voluntary exit and a leadership reshuffle—or there may be a palace coup. The system of personalized power is deeper than just the current regime, and a change of faces at the top may allow things to drag on for a while longer. Even among the protesters and intellectuals, one can detect a longing for charismatic leadership and a new savior.

The demise of the personalized-power system that has been suffocating Russia for centuries could be an extended and dramatic process.

That system's remaining pillars are three. The first is the neo-imperial, Russia-as-superpower mentality that retains a hold on the political class and some segments of society. Putin and his team play on this by emphasizing Russia's global role, Moscow's perceived need to throw its weight around within the post-Soviet "near abroad," the creation of the Eurasian Union, the indivisibility of the Russian Federation, and the putative need to keep its "alien" regions (such as the North Caucasus) under Russian tutelage as *de facto* protectorates.

The second pillar is a militaristic form of statism that points to the existence of real or (more often) imagined threats to Russia in order to legitimize the subjugation of society. Putin's goal of a "new industrialization" based on the military-industrial complex is this old model dressed up in a novel guise.

The third pillar is the apprehension of Western governments that prefer a stable if undemocratic Russia to a Russia in the throes of unpredictable change. The West's tacit approval, or at least acceptance, is a significant source of legitimacy for the Putin regime—all the more so as it watches its domestic legitimacy crumble. That Western governments facing their own malaise and dysfunctionality have no stomach for turbulence in Russia is unsurprising. Yet the West, by its silence and passivity, is indirectly (and in some cases, directly) helping the "Russian system" of personalized power to appear civilized, and thus is complicating Russia's path to liberal democracy.¹¹

The only way to transform the Russian system into something more democratic is to eliminate the old triad of personalized power, the merger of that power with business interests, and neoimperial ambitions. Powerful pressure from society will be needed. The political and social actors ready to exert this kind of sustained, organized pressure have not yet emerged. Yet the stirrings we have witnessed from society in recent months offer grounds for hope that the agents of change may appear in the not-so-distant future. They could emerge from among the middle levels of the intelligentsia, the media, and business, particularly in sectors linked strongly to expertise and innovation, and from among younger people—those farthest from the Soviet past. Until recently, the Kremlin's constant clampdowns and discrediting campaigns prevented the opposition from gaining strength. Today, however, it is beginning to appear more likely that such regime efforts will backfire by arousing more and wider resistance in response, and by spurring society to pry open more autonomous space beyond the reach of state control.

Yet even if change agents appear and gird themselves well for struggle, Russia will face another problem. At both the elite and popular levels, the country is replete with powerful rent-seeking groups that benefit from the existing system and can be expected to fight for it.

Moreover, the postcommunist elites have built a system that deliberately lacks constitutional and political means for resolving conflicts and deadlocks. This raises the disturbing possibility that the “battle” over the system’s future may be not so much metaphorical and institutional as literal and waged in the streets. Then, too, there is the close-knit nature of the ruling team and its dependence on the security services. Hopes for the realization of a “pacted transition” between system pragmatists and the opposition appear dim in view of this circumstance.¹² Revolution might be the only answer to the question of how to displace rent-seeking stakeholders and restructure the system so that it is open to new interests. Frustrations born of fake liberalization and cosmetic efforts at trivial change could make that revolutionary process more intense and violent than it might otherwise be.

Russia is now in a race against time. Should a real alternative to the current regime fail to appear in the next five to ten years, the system may simply begin to fall apart. This would complicate attempts to set new rules based on liberal-democratic principles. The old system’s spontaneous collapse and public discontent could bring about a repeat of 1991 and see the personalized-power system regenerate itself in new packaging. However that may be, the Russian system’s demise is currently accelerating, and Russia’s political class and society do not have much time to find peaceful ways out of the current impasse before the system starts to unravel.

There is something new today under the Russian political sun—a sense, shared across broad layers of society, that the system of personalized rule has no future. Putinism as a leadership style and a type of regime with any hope for legitimacy is dead, but it is not yet gone. The problem is how to get it safely buried together with the institutional structure that it embodies.

NOTES

1. The tricks that Kremlin-run election commissions used in order to ensure United Russia’s victory included ballot-stuffing, doctoring results, using “carousels” (people paid to go from one polling station to another and vote for United Russia), adding “dead souls” to the voter rolls, and using the police to drive independent election observers away from polling places.

2. See www.novayagazeta.ru/topics/12.html.

3. See interviews of the independent experts Dmitri Oreshkin and Alexander Kynev under the title “In Reality Putin Did Not Win,” at www.svobodanews.ru.

4. Vladislav Inozemtsev, “Neo-Feudalism Explained,” *American Interest* 6 (March–April 2011): 73. Russian opinion-survey agencies also failed to detect the rise of discontent—respondents do not always tell the truth when asked how they feel about the authorities. One expert found the Putin regime resilient and Russians unready for dissent because those most protest-prone had either left the country or become Web-addled. See Ivan Krastev, “Paradoxes of the New Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 22 (April 2011): 15.

5. According to polls taken by the Levada Center, most of the protesters identified themselves as technical specialists, middle managers, journalists, or students. Interview with Lev Gudkov, "Dissatisfaction with Authorities Is Intensifying," *Izvestia*, 6 March 2012.

6. Medvedev proposed amending the political-parties law to make it easier for parties to register, yet the same package of proposed amendments also contained provisions designed to further fragment and cripple the opposition by multiplying the number of tiny "sofa parties," by making it harder for parties to form coalitions, and by keeping tight state controls on party activities. He also suggested the idea of gubernatorial elections that would be direct yet tightly "filtered" so as to exclude independent candidates.

7. See www.levada.ru/24-02-2012/vybory-prezidenta-dopolnenie-k-prezentatsii-chast-1-mitingi-protesta-i-v-podderzhku-vputi.

8. See www.levada.ru/17-11-2011/o-pravakh-cheloveka-interesakh-vlasti-i-obshchestva-v-rossii. Around 44 percent of respondents supported the Moscow protests; 46 percent said that the main reason for the protests "was the fact that the state did not respect people's rights"; and 54 percent agreed that the authorities have turned popular voting into a "procedure to perpetuate their power." See Georgy Ilichev, "The December Folks," *Novaya gazeta*, 11 January 2012. See www.levada.ru/19-12-2011/moskvichi-ob-oppozitsii-i-aksiyakh-protesta-vystupleniyakh-v-podderzhku-edinoi-rossii. In a survey taken in March 2012, only 15 percent of those polled said that they believed the presidential elections were fair. See also www.levada.ru/04-04-2012/rossiyane-o-chestnosti-proshedshikh-vyborov-i-dvizhenii-liga-izbiratelei.

9. See www.levada.ru/03-04-2012/rossiyane-o-politicheskom-rezhime-i-lyudyakh-kotorym-prinadlezhit-vlast.

10. See www.levada.ru/29-12-2011/chego-ozhidayut-rossiyane-v-nastupayushchem-godu.

11. Russian liberals are becoming openly critical of the main Western approach to the Russian regime: "Paris and Berlin are solid supporters of Putin. Obama's Russia policy is much more advantageous to Putin and his inner circle than [was] that of former U.S. President Bush"; Vladimir Ryzhkov, "Replace Jackson-Vannik with the Magnitsky Act," *Moscow Times*, 20 March 2012.

12. The process of potential dissent within Putin's team may have already started. Former finance minister Alexei Kudrin has become a tough critic of the system. "We need political freedoms and political competition," he declared. But at the same time, he stressed that "the process should be evolutionary." See <http://akudrin.ru/news/bazovye-nashi-nedostatki-lechatsya.html>. This rhetoric shows that the "system liberals" are still not ready to leave the government ship; hence their role in future developments is unclear. Their hesitations may hinder the transformation process.