

Russia Transformed and Putin's Challenge

Written by Gordon M. Hahn

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GORDON M. HAHN, JAN 27 2012

In the next few months Russian Premier, and former and likely future Russian president, Vladimir Putin will be faced with the new challenge emanating from the resurrection of civil society and nascent 'white revolution' that President Dmitrii Medvedev's liberalization policies have wrought. How Putin and Medvedev react to and manage this challenge will go a long way in determining whether Russia continues to muddle through under a kleptocratic soft authoritarian order, makes a breakthrough to democracy, or falls back on a darker authoritarian pattern.

The first challenge the Putin-Medvedev tandem faces is to siphon off some of the discontent expressed in December's first wave of demonstrations in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and many other cities across Russia. Medvedev has already taken several steps to accomplish this, offering in his last annual presidential address to Russia's Federal Assembly a series of reforms that, if implemented, would constitute substantive progress towards making the Russian political system democratic. In a recent interview former Finance Minister Aleksei Kudrin, who resigned ostensibly over spending issues in September, revealed that the reform package had been prepared a long ago and was simply introduced earlier in response to the December protests against the Duma election process.

First, Medvedev announced a bill that would remove the requirement that political parties gather signatures to register for federal State Duma and regional legislative assembly elections. This reform was praised by all Russian parties and analysts; the signature requirement had been a key mechanism for preventing undesired parties from competing with the Kremlin's party Yedinaya Rossiya (YeR).

Second, the requirements to register parties will be drastically lightened. Instead of demanding 45,000 signatures taken from at least 50 percent of Russia's 83 regions, only 500 signatures will be needed. This effectively ends another requirement used by the Kremlin to tilt the playing field in the YeR's favor.

Third, the president proposed instituting a proportional voting system in Russia's 225 voting districts from which the Duma is elected. This will allow more independent candidates to become legislators. The fact is that for small parties unable to reach the 5 percent barrier, which will again be in force for the 2016 Duma in accordance with a recent Medvedev initiative, this mechanism is preferable to the presently pure PR system.

Fourth, Medvedev proposed a bill to reduce the number of signatures needed to register as a presidential candidate from the present 2 million to 300,000 for candidates from the parties with seats in the Duma and only 100,000 for non-parliamentary parties' candidates. Although not entirely satisfactory, it is a vast improvement over the presently prohibitive system.

Fifth, he proposed returning to the direct popular election of governors, though a battle may be ensuing over the draft bill, with traditionalists like Putin seeking to reintroduce a presidential 'filter' to screen candidates beforehand.

Sixth, Medvedev proposed an increase in the representation of opposition parties on electoral commissions to ensure fair voting and vote counting. Depending on the details, this could eliminate or at least reduce cheating on behalf of the Kremlin's party and candidates.

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Seventh, the president reiterated and seemed to radicalize his call for a decentralization of power from the federal level of government to the regional, municipal, and local levels. Medvedev proposed other reforms as well, including the establishment of a public television channel in place of one of the state channels, to be controlled neither by the state nor by 'private interests'.

This truly was a rapid acceleration of the more liberal course that had been outlined by Putin and apparently led by Medvedev over the last four years; one that has gone completely unreported in the U.S. mainstream media. Medvedev had previously instituted and gradually tightened anti-corruption legislation, reformed the Internal Affairs Ministry, humanized sentencing laws and rules by decriminalizing certain white collar crimes and misdemeanors, began reforms of the prison system, allowed more open political discussion on state-run television, defended freedom on the Internet, removed state officials from the boards of state corporations, prepared a major privatization of state enterprises, and made minor reforms of the political system slightly rolling back some of Putin's counter-reforms – prelude to the reforms announced in his presidential address.

However, the problem with Russia's political system, including its party and electoral system, lies not simply in its laws but in the rule of law – that is, law enforcement and its use for political purposes. Tackling this problem will be extremely difficult in a short few months. Thus, Putin has sent out a command to his United Russia party and the state bureaucracy at both the federal and regional levels, lavishly advertised in the media, that the March 4th presidential elections should be free and fair, nodding to the white revolution's core demand for honest elections.

To help ensure this, Putin has ordered that cameras and transparent ballot boxes be installed in all voting precincts. To some extent, the rise of civil society forced this on Putin not just by its demands but by concrete steps it is taking to monitor the vote. Several new organizations – most notably the League of Voters – have emerged promising to send inspectors to all of the country's election precincts to ensure a clean vote. In the State Duma vote that sparked the nascent 'white revolution' it was precisely the opposition's heightened vigilance, together with new technology, that enabled them to highlight cheating that paled in comparison with previous elections.

The more immediate problem is to get through the February 4th march through central Moscow and another protest action still undefined to be held on February 26th. Since Medvedev's installation of Sergei Sobyenin as mayor of Moscow in September 2010, the authorities have been more accepting of protests and demonstrations, and have given permission for this latest march to go ahead.. However there is a danger that because the march will be a much less secure event than the demonstrations (where access was tightly controlled by the police with the use of metal-detectors at the entrances and with the help of a closed perimeter) marchers will be exposed to all manner of potential provocations or even attacks. Ultra-nationalists, who have formed a small part of the white revolution movement, or even Islamic extremists, could undertake a provocation sparking riots, violence, or even internecine warfare. The spark could very well be whipped up into a blaze by irreconcilable opposition elements and Western media who will propagandize the version that Putin and the FSB were behind the violence.

If Russia gets past February's pre-election demonstrations without incident, the next hurdle will be the elections themselves. The street-level opposition, especially in Moscow, likely will be outraged should Putin win – and perhaps rightly so – regardless of the new more democratic electoral monitoring and instructions for a clean election. Recent polls show Putin just below or just above the 50 percent barrier that is required to win in the first round and avoid a runoff. The opposition's level of distrust, indeed the general level of distrust in Russian society overall, will make it nigh impossible for opposition forces to believe or acknowledge that Putin won in the runoff, not to mention in the first round. Thus, Putin is unlikely to negotiate this key hurdle, and March's demonstrations will be the largest ones ever. As a result, this year, even this spring, in Moscow should be fateful for Russia's future development.

Those liberals and opportunists who have not already defected from the ruling elite to the opposition will begin to do so in more significant numbers. The liberal wing of the ruling elite has been stewing and beginning to split away from the tandem – or at least from Putin – for some years. Now Putin will be faced with a choice: either sit at roundtable with moderate elements in the opposition, seek to muddle through and hope the nascent revolution fades away, or crackdown. The last choice is the least likely won. For those who are inclined to exclude the first, it should be remembered that Medvedev's 4 consecutive years of reforms, which I have documented and called elsewhere the

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'Medvedev thaw', 'Perestroika 2.0', and 'Glasnost 2.0' , have laid the groundwork for civil society's re-emergence. Medvedev's liberalization policies sent a clear signal to Russian society that they might be getting another opportunity to make the transition from subjects to full citizens at this time. The same resurrection of civil society and mobilization of opposition groups occurred after several years of Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika 1.0 and glasnost (openness) 1.0.

The emerging regime split puts extra strain on what may already have been a somewhat strained Putin-Medvedev relationship. Although Putin recently endorsed Medvedev's post-demonstration democratic reforms more wholeheartedly than at first, one cannot exclude the possibility that Medvedev acted unilaterally, as insider political analyst Gleb Pavlovskii has claimed, or as part of a deal with Putin in return for Medvedev's agreement to step aside and let Putin run in the presidential election. This raises the potential for a more serious split within the tandem itself, perhaps some form of a palace coup in service of a Medvedev-led democratic revolution.

The way to stop the bleeding of the liberal elite is to implement more reforms in an effort to assuage the societal opposition and then enter into roundtable talks with its moderates. This, however, risks springing new leaks within the elite on the traditionalist side and perhaps a restorationist authoritarian coup led by Putin or someone else from among the traditionalists or *siloviki* (security, police or military).

The way out then is for Putin and Medvedev to negotiate both a resolution that guarantees a transition to full democracy or at least meets the opposition's demands and simultaneously guarantees a safe extrication from power for Putin and the security organs through a deal on immunity from prosecution; all of which would be consummated by new Duma and presidential elections a year or so from now. Whether the mounting political, economic, and institutional pressures will allow a successful navigation of Russia's increasingly storm waters remains alas unknown.

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