



When the other Russia unites against United Russia

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Late 2011-12 onwards has been marked in Russia by an unprecedented civil society mobilisation that has surprised many observers. In the run-up to the March 4th 2012 presidential election, the roots and effects of this movement that some called “Russia’s political awakening”² need to be investigated.

When Vladimir Putin came into power in 2000, he was, despite his label of KGB man, the leader a lot of Russians were waiting for. A young, sober, determined man, with ideas and an inspired team. This opened up a new chapter in Russia’s contemporary political history. From Kaliningrad to Vladivostok, many were calling for it after the disorder and tremendous difficulties of the Yeltsin era. Two factors, symbols of the return of the state, made V. Putin an immensely popular man: the return to economic growth, which allowed him to pay off salary arrears and pensions, and more generally, to raise the living standards of many Russians; and the restoration of order and stability, two virtues of the Soviet era which were sorely missed, and of which the (false) “normalisation” of Chechnya was the cornerstone. The country was tired of ideologies. He did not force it. Though an authoritarian, he appeared “democratic” enough to a large part of Russian citizens for them to accept the ambiguous terms of the proposed social contract.

Putin’s Neo-Sovietism: a besieged fortress mentality

Before the vigorous economic growth experienced by Russia since the 1998 financial meltdown came to an abrupt halt as a result of the ongoing global crisis, the favourable economic climate of the Putin era had reignited the flame of national pride. During his nearly ten-year term in office, Russia has shown again the undisguised desire to reclaim its position as a major player on the international stage. Yet, while the “Russian revival” today flirts with the ideals of power, it has also stressed the dead end of a collusive economic and political system, as the 2008 war has cast light on the structural problems of its armed forces.

Among the Soviet dogmas that V. Putin skilfully recycled, few have become as strong in the past decade as that of an envied and threatened Russia recovering its power. Even though the iron curtain does not exist anymore, there remains in Russia a mental boundary between what is “ours” (i.e. Russian) and what is associated to a jealous and hostile “otherness”. For ten years, all Putin and his friends have achieved is somehow due to their skill at re-cementing this invisible wall. As a consequence, the election campaign for the last parliamentary elections has been characterised by intensive propaganda prominently depicting the U.S. anti-missile system as an existential threat to the nation. Undoubtedly, the target of this campaign was not Western public opinions, that of countries where Russian elite heavily invests the dividends of crony capita-

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² Prokoviev, Alexis, “Pourquoi la Russie s’est levée”, *Regard sur l’Est*, 15 January 2012.

lism “Kremlin Inc.”³, but rather the domestic audience. In this context of exacerbated antagonism, anyone who criticises the government from within is opportunely accused of helping the nation’s enemies without by providing them ammunition for very little: words as “traitors”, “saboteurs” and “foreign agents” came back to life to fill up revived harangues and imageries of the cold war.⁴ At the helm of this ideological construct, where enemies are everywhere and cynicism reigns supreme, many key figures of the “Putin system” like to think of themselves as struggling with a population which has neither the taste nor the skill for democracy and which is ready to accept every transgression as long as its purchasing power keeps rising. For twelve years, the energetic rent has allowed V. Putin to partly buy social peace. Even though the sharp increase in income at the beginning of the 2000s has now shown clear limits, Russia, in comparison with the chaos of the 1990s, has reached a form of economic stability which has enabled many Russian people to access a more comfortable life. Hence, the support of a still significant part of the population which continues to favour the assurances provided by the current government over the uncertainties of the vacuum that could succeed it.

Cynicism and pretences: a turning point has been reached ?

Yet, when on last 24 September, V. Putin openly confirmed what many had ended up forgetting to take for granted, i.e. that the planned job swap with Dmitry Medvedev would occur no matter what Russian voters might think about it, many saw red. With the cat finally out of the bag, D. Medvedev could slip away in the eyes of Russians and of the world,⁵ when it appeared that the latter, who used to be the darling of Western chancelleries where many had ended up believing in the reality of his presidential ambitions, docilely agreed to become “just” prime minister again of his political mentor. Some reckon that V. Putin would never have forgiven him for not having vetoed the West’s military intervention in Libya.⁶ This discord at the top of the executive branch would have been the apex of the muted rivalry opposing the two men, compelling Medvedev to renounce a second term. Beyond conjectures, it is clear that D. Medvedev irremediably disappointed his supporters, all those who, within and outside the country, had seen in him a reformer keen to promote liberal ideas. The illusion is over. When D. Medvedev accepted, as a faithful lieutenant, to head the list of United Russia in the parliamentary elections, he de facto officialised his subordination to the neo-Soviet conservative guard. Paradoxically, doing so, he returned to the ranks of those within the political establishment that consider him as the main person to blame for the current disorders.⁷ The one who still enjoyed strong support in the run-up to the presidential election just a few months ago has lost all political credit in a flash. There is no mistaking the signs. On 10 and 24 December, the crowds of demonstrators gathered on Bolotnaya Square already seemed to ignore him, directing their anger at the strong man Putin. Polls haven’t measured the scale of his discredit yet and he remains omnipresent on television channels, but the movement has such strength that some now feel that the planned appointment of the outgoing president as prime minister in the spring of 2012 could be jeopardised.⁸ The only problem, as highlights political analyst Igor Bunin, is that “the two men had struck a deal that will be difficult to break”.⁹ Yet, difficult is not impossible as necessity is the mother of invention...

When they announced they would swap jobs, Messrs Putin and Medvedev clearly showed to Russian voters that they were considering them as children and this, from the very beginning. But the elections, as flawed and rigged as they might have been,¹⁰ have radically changed things. They exposed the rejection from a significant part of the population of the sham dynastic-like power handover that has existed since the Soviet era. These deceivable rules and tricks of the officialdom, where everything is but cynicism and false pretences, had already leached away support for United Russia well before the parliamentary elections. As a result, when it appeared to many that the ballot had been rig-ged, indignation hit a peak. A turning point had been reached. On 10 and 24 December, several tens – even hundreds – of thousands of men and women

³ Shevtsova, Lilia, “The Temporary Return of Putin Co.”, *Foreign Affairs*, 3 October 2011. For a detailed analysis of the “Putin system”, see in particular H  l  ne Blanc, *KGB Connection. Le syst  me Poutine*, Hors Commerce, Paris, March 2004; Merlin, Aude (ed.), *O   va la Russie ?*, Brussels, Editions de l’Universit  , 2007

⁴ “The Long Life of Homo Sovieticus”, *The Economist*, 10 December 2011 (<http://www.economist.com/node/21541444>)

⁵ Prokopiev, Alexis, op. cit.

⁶ “The Cracks Appear”, *The Economist*, 10 December 2011 (<http://www.economist.com/node/21541401>)

⁷ Ioffe, Julia, “Nine Days that Shook the Kremlin”, *Foreign Policy*, 13 December 2011

⁸ Petrov, Nikolay, “An Exciting End to a Dull Election”, *The Moscow Times*, 6 December 2011 (<http://carnegie.ru/publiations/?fa=46150>, last accessed 24 January 2012)

⁹ Bunin, Igor, quoted in Prokopiev, op. cit.

¹⁰ For a detailed analysis of the nature and the scale of pitfalls observed during the elections in the light of the best current international standards, read the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report, available on: http://www.osce.org/odihr/86959?bcsi_scan_3c79e7817cdc4fd7=

took to the streets of Moscow, St Petersburg and over fifty other big cities, in an unprecedented mobilisation since the end of the USSR. Their initial message, the expression of their anger at the broadly publicised rigging of the parliamentary elections, rapidly turned into a more general criticism of the current governmental regime.

The end of an era?

While “correction” of election results is not new in Russia, V. Putin’s too cynical readiness to openly rig the ballot eventually awoke part of the citizenry. What is most striking, and probably most significant, in the way the protest movement came to life, is that many demonstrators, among which a great deal of young graduates and “average” Russians, had until then described themselves as apolitical.¹¹ Whereas the number of people venting their discontent at problems that have become chronic – corruption, lawlessness, misuses of power – via blogs and social networks has risen in recent years, few were those willing to take to the streets. This paradox of Russian civil society can partly be explained by the low capacity for action of the leaders of the organised opposition, complemented by the population’s mistrust of them. In this lies the turning point of the winter 2011-12 demonstrations. For the first time on such a scale, and without prejudice to its capacity to turn offended dignity into enduring commitment, everywhere in Russia, the expression of the people’s will to move up out of the Putin system succeeded in amalgamating in the streets the strange fabric of the opposition, this disparate nexus mixing liberals, communists and nationalists, anti-corruption activists and ecologists, all more or less kept in check by a handful of dissident intellectuals.

This is a fundamentally new political configuration in Russia, where, in the context of a major crisis of confidence in formal institutions and organisations, social and political activism of ordinary citizens keeps growing¹², as can be seen everywhere in the emergence of new informal movements. These movements, which are often very local and mobilised for a specific cause, have swollen thanks to the dissemination of information through the Internet (via *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Livejournal*). In the hands of a young population, free from the Soviet past and less keen to dash its hopes and desires, they have enabled the mobilisation of a new generation of militants whose initiatives have now shown to which extent they can act as cores for the crystallisation of the social movement and civil society in the country. As a main outlet for freedom of speech in Russia, the Web has established itself in recent years as a major space of tensions between society and state. Up until now this had gone through a more and more active community of bloggers, but, with the huge success of social networks in the role formerly performed by the famous kitchens of Soviet apartment blocks, the community of web dissidents has grown. Thanks to the new technologies, the representatives of these new citizens’ movements, of which figures as Alexej Navalny and Ilija Yachine have become the symbols, could meet, enter into dialogue and then organise themselves. The following demonstrations are an outstanding example of the changes occurring in Russian society: these changes consistently originated on the web before taking form in the streets.

The protest is other than “just” a common vision for change, it is above all driven by a perceived lack of alternatives. What makes the events we are witnessing today in Russia different is that they have no unique catalyst. In comparison with the sociology of the “Arab Spring” movements, Russian demonstrators’ main motivation is not to expose poverty or economic problems. The protest movement actually carries a wide range of claims, underpinned by various ideologies. The unity shown in the streets is a mere façade. The Russian non-parliamentary opposition, that of activists and dissidents who have never been willing and/or authorised to register as parties, is deeply divided and is faced with huge leadership, strategy and coordination problems, which exacerbate divisions and cause many to doubt their capacity to sustain the movement. Yet, while one might be well inclined to think that this movement will nothing but lose momentum, it still marks the end of an era in Russia, as it is evident that the will to *correct* the political system (and not to overthrow it), to make it more inclusive, representative and fair, is shared. With these demonstrations, it is merely no longer possible to portray Russia as the country of a perfectly docile society, with tame authorities, led by an authoritarian and effective leadership toward a long-awaited modernisation. The lies from the propaganda that the regime had thought flexible enough in the prevailing apathy to once again cover up the scale of fraud were experienced by many as the ultimate humiliation. The irony of the latest elections is that though they do not have any true institutional meaning – the State Duma will remain largely powerless, they have opened a Pandora’s box by revealing the excessive methods used by the authorities.

¹¹ “The Long Life of Homo Sovieticus”, op. cit.

¹² Stroganova, Anya, “Russie : L’opposition virtuelle”, 4 December 2011 (<http://www.grotius.fr/russie-l'opposition-virtuelle/>, last accessed 24 January 2012)

Beyond the chronicle of a victory foretold: Putin against Russia and the world

After one decennia of authoritarian stability, the Russian political regime is now showing a vulnerability which bears an uncanny resemblance to that prevailing at the end of the USSR, although the current circumstances are very different. It was popular vote that brought down the communist system, twenty years later it is a parliamentary election that causes a breach in the Putin system.¹³ “Asking the masses to become citizens just for a polling day is never a trivial matter”, comments with a hint of irony political analyst Dmitri Trentin.¹⁴ Putin did not obtain the large majority he wished for in the Duma.¹⁵ This is already an unprecedented setback in itself. However, while he didn’t win, he did not lose either, except for the battle of the meaning and of the symbols. Yet beyond the mere redistribution of seats orchestrated by United Russia in the Duma between the party bosses in power and the traditional “opposition” parties integrated into the system, the poor results obtained in several regions, where a storm of opposition never seen before arose against local potentates endorsed by the Kremlin, have added to the humiliation experienced by the regime.

V. Putin has indisputably suffered a setback, but he will never publicly admit that he could be faulted. Indeed he does not appear to doubt his ability to rectify the situation.¹⁶ And as a matter of fact, he will most likely succeed in getting things back to normal. In the short term, the government’s strategy is clear: dividing the opposition and discrediting the legitimacy of its message. Its heterogeneity and the absence of clear leadership certainly contribute to this, at least for the moment. In the longer term, whatever the tactical choices, it is highly likely that the Kremlin strategy will be populist, wrapped in a “social-patriotic” discourse within, and uncompromising to the outside world. V. Putin will strengthen the networks around him and will keep a national, antiglobalist and hostile discourse in NATO. The high price of raw materials provides him comfortable resources and useful levers in the negotiations with foreign partners, especially the EU. There is little doubt that he will pursue his policy of influence and economic interference in the former Soviet republics (cf. Eurasian Union). He will rather continue to develop ties with China and to take a hard line on Iran, Syria and any international issue in which Russia is a key player. In the current context of the reaffirmation of its diplomacy, Russia tends to adopt principled positions which often appear to be dissociated with its real interests as its political positioning seems to depend on how it is perceived by Western powers.¹⁷ In this respect, the endeavour to spare Russian authorities’ intention to preserve their harmed influence in Middle East countries swept by regime change will condition in coming times Moscow’s diplomatic aggiornamento towards the drama unfolding behind close doors in Syria. Regarding the sensitive issues concerning both Russia and the American authorities, the Russian perspective is often reminiscent of that of the cold war. Yet, beyond the seemingly neo-imperialist position of the Kremlin, the time of an imperial Russia is over and done with,¹⁸ and the current system, based on growth without development, capitalism without democracy and policies of a major power without the associated international attractiveness, is not sustainable in the long term. As has often been the case through its history, the existential threat posed to Russia does not so much come from the external world as from its own contradictions.

A page is being turned. The parliamentary elections of 4 December 2011 have definitely triggered the protest movement we have witnessed since then. Cracks have appeared in the myth of the invincible and worshiped national leader. For V. Putin, these elections are the sign that everything that comes from him is not automatically met with success anymore. A. Malachenko wrote on this: “Putin has stopped being the all encompassing national leader - in the eyes of his team, the ruling political class and society”.¹⁹ Here certainly lies the most determining aspect of the recent events: the name “Putin” has lost its magical power. Indeed, this won’t suffice to change the authoritarian and patronage-based nature of the regime, but the mantra of stability seems to have suffered a serious blow. V. Putin never thought that he could be the victim of the wearing effect of a decade in power. Yet, in the eyes of more and more Russians, his ideas and above all his methods are now outdated. Faced with a less favourable political climate than expected, the Russian authorities have now been reduced to improvise at the service of the ambition of a leader who has pushed the limits so far that his own institutions and power basis are now undermined. Yet jumping to the conclusion that the system has reached an end would be a step too far. However, it does look like the end of the stability era of an ossified political monopoly has well begun. For the first time in years, the *res publica* has be-

¹³ OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report, op. cit.

¹⁴ “Protests in Russia”, Q&A Session with D. Trenin, 29 December 2011 (<http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/12/29/protests-in-russia/8rp4>, last accessed 17 January 2012)

¹⁵ Despite the reported extent of the fraud, United Russia “only” obtained 238 seats on 450.

¹⁶ Dmitri Trentin, op.cit.

¹⁷ Delcour, Laure, “Les points de crispation de la politique étrangère russe”, *Note de l’IRIS*, February 2009.

¹⁸ Isabelle Facon, “Le renouveau de la puissance russe face à l’Europe”, *Regard sur l’Est*, 10 April 2011.

¹⁹ Malachenko, Alexei, “Russia’s stunning protests end with hint of change”, *The Washington Times*, 10 December 2011 (http://admin.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/dec/10/thousands-russia-protest-against-putin-election_4/)

come something that matters again in the eyes of many citizens. The shroud of alienation and apathy that weighed heavily on the population for years has begun to lift as a result of its exact opposite: mass civic participation. The opposition's role is now to succeed in maintaining and politicising this movement. This will prove impossible to achieve by the end of March, but it is possible to capitalise on the longer term. While no clear evidence suggests that Putin's announced victory in the March 2012 presidential election is really jeopardised, the crumbling legitimacy of his power, as well as that of the system that has been built by and around the man for twelve years, is well real and leaves him with a dilemma: changing policy, by tackling impunity and liberalising the access to the political sphere, or cracking down on dissidents. The second option is the most likely one. President Medvedev did promise a reform to liberalise the political system²⁰, yet H  l  ne Blanc, an expert on Russia at the French "Centre national de la recherche scientifique" (National Endowment for Scientific Research), doesn't believe in this. "They have been putting on the same little act for five years, starring the good cop and the bad cop"²¹. Saying so, she highlights that, despite D. Medvedev's pledge to embrace reforms, the attacks against civil society and the stiffening of the system have in fact never ceased, quite the opposite. Besides, we can assume that the incumbent president, at the end of his term, will not have the means to impose his umpteenth promises of political openness. As far as the crackdown is concerned, while we cannot play down the violent arrests and the prison stays of a number of opponents, the government seems for now to keep the balance, hoping for the situation to calm down. Beyond all the rhetoric, the political tricks and some cosmetic changes within the "vertical of power", what remains above all is contempt. It is quite unlikely that V. Putin will easily accept to curtail its power by altering significantly enough the governmental regime that has been patiently built up since the early 2000s. After all, even if United Russia had to commit offences to keep its grip on the State Duma and the regional and local assemblies, the men of Putin's party still have a firm hold on the country.

What now?

Whatever the direction in which Russia will move from now on – and there are strong grounds for believing that, as far as the nature of power is considered, nothing (or next to nothing) will fundamentally change in the short and medium term – one moment will certainly go down in history as the turning point where the social contract made in 2000 between V. Putin and the Russian people has been broken to many: that of September 2011, when Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev announced with little regard for Russian public opinion the third act of their duet. While this doesn't herald the imminent demise of Putinism, its very foundations have now been undermined. Probably for the first time since V. Putin came to power in 2000, the perspective of a Russia without him is not unthinkable anymore. The "awakening" of Russian society has begun to transform the political landscape of the country. Yet, one should be wary of not falling into the trap of too readily interpreting a catchy "Russian winter" that would as such superimpose the specific dynamics of the "Arab spring" onto a very different socio-political reality. Russia, a ramshackle authoritarian system with some democratic trappings (some of which are very meaningful indeed) is not in transition to or from anything. Russia is what it is. More than the end of a political model, it is now witnessing the end of a cycle, that of an apparent stability, which is being completed with the expression of a vivid desire for reforms by a growing number of people, without "orange revolution" or "Russian winter/spring". Many Russian citizens recognise themselves in this reform-without-revolution-seeking move. At the helm for a new presidential term, Vladimir Putin is now constrained to do nothing but to start changing course.

²⁰ "Les derni  res promesses de r  forme de Dmitri Medvedev", *Le Figaro*, 23 December 2011 (<http://www.Le-figaro.fr/international/2011/12/22/01003-20111222ARTFIG00480-les-dernieres-promesses-de-reforme-de-dmitri-medvedev.php>)

²¹ H  l  ne Blanc, <http://international.blogs.ouest-france.fr/archive/2011/12/06.html>