
3. The New Russia's Uncertainty: Atrophy, Implosion or Change?

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Introduction

The protests following the Russian parliamentary elections in December 2011, the largest since the collapse of the Soviet Union, shattered a status quo that had taken shape over the last decade and signalled that the country is entering turbulent waters. Russia finds itself caught in a trap: the 2011–12 parliamentary and presidential elections are intended to perpetuate a personalized power system that has become the source of decay. However, the top-down model of rule and its 'personifier' – Vladimir Putin – are already rejected by the most dynamic and educated urban sectors of the population.

It is hard to predict what consequences this will have: will it lead to the system's disintegration and even to the collapse of the state through growing rot and atrophy, or will the last gasp of personalized power end with a transformation that sets Russia on a new foundation? One thing is apparent: transformation will not happen in the shape of reform from above or within the system; if it does occur it will be the result of the deepening crisis and pressure from society.

The perpetuation of the Russian system

Over the years, Russia's ruling elite under Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev has put together

what looks superficially like a very effective model for preserving the traditional Russian system resting upon three pillars – personalized power, its merger with property and an imperial outlook. This 'trinity' has been adapted to the new global and domestic reality, and to limited state resources. A number of mechanisms are used today to keep the personalized power system in place. Chief among them are:

- Imitation of Western institutions (parliament, elections, political pluralism) in order to give Russia's autocracy a civilized veneer;
- A circumstance-based 'pragmatism' concealing incompatible ideas and principles that has replaced coherent ideology and principles;
- Comparisons with the 'bad' Yeltsin period in order to present Putin as the leader who guarantees stability and growth;
- A combination of carrot-and-stick tactics such as co-opting members of various social groups, paternalistic policies to buy people's loyalty, and selective use of force or 'scare tactics' to prevent the consolidation of public opinion against the authorities;
- Comparatively broader space for personal freedoms (e.g. the continuation of free internet usage and the right to emigrate) to prevent people from demanding political freedoms;
- A foreign policy based on the principle of being simultaneously with, within and against the West, which makes it easier for the political elite to integrate personally into Western society while keeping Russian society closed off from the West by presenting it as an opponent and even an enemy.

Under Putin and Medvedev the Russian elite returned to its three habitual policies perpetuating the system that had been used by the Kremlin for centuries: militarism, attempts to modernize the economy using Western means and technology, and adherence to the 'non-accountability' principle.

With respect to militarism, the Kremlin realizes that Russia is not ready for a new confrontation with the West. However, the primacy of the state in Russia, which remains the spine of the system, demands the constant invocation

of real or imagined threats, external and internal. Hence the need for a militaristic model to respond to these threats which determines the Russian state and nation's existence.

Today this model has exhausted its potential. But the Russian elite has failed to build a new mechanism to prop up the system, forcing Putin's ruling corporation to return to elements and symbols of a militaristic policy. The Kremlin is again attempting to consolidate society around the regime by projecting the image of Russia as a 'besieged fortress' and through the search for enemies at home and abroad. The 'besieged fortress' syndrome can be temporarily alleviated (as during Putin's anti-terrorist collaboration with George W. Bush in 2001–03 and during the 'reset' with Barack Obama, for example) or made to flare up if other methods for uniting the people around the Kremlin fail (as during the frosty relations with Washington in 2004–08).

Recent years have seen the use of many typical instruments from the old survival strategy book. These include the anti-NATO rhetoric¹ of the leadership and official propaganda, the attempt to transform the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) into a counterweight to NATO, rattling the nuclear sabre, militarization of the budget (spending on state defence, security and law enforcement will increase by 32.4% in 2012),² the constant emphasis on militaristic symbols in the Kremlin's public relations (frequent appearances by both Putin and Medvedev in commander-in-chief's uniform, or media opportunities for Putin in a fighter plane cockpit or Medvedev watching military exercises). The establishment of the All Russian People's Front and use of military vocabulary in the best Stalinist tradition before the 2011–12 elections are yet further signs of the authorities' attempts to revive the militarist outlook, which may look toothless but hardly help to build international relations based on trust.

As for modernization through accessing the West's money and technology, Russia has tried twice to use this model of economic and technological rejuvenation: under Peter the Great and Josef Stalin.³ These attempts revived the economy for brief periods but ended with renewed stagnation. The attempts during the last 20 years to use the same strategy to modernize Russia without changing its political system did not bring even partial success. Spreading the use of new-generation technology requires a free society and free individuals. The pitiful attempt to establish a closed 'modernization zone' in Skolkovo confirms that the old model for re-energizing monopolized power no longer works. Skolkovo itself looks unlikely to have much chance of success now that everyone sees how its 'godfather', Medvedev, turned into a political ghost.

As far as 'non-accountability' is concerned, this requires that the leader is formally placed on a pedestal as the sole legitimate political player. He stands above the Russian political scene and is the only one who has all the means and instruments and levers of power. At the same time he shirks responsibility in order to survive. The leader would otherwise be answerable for every failure of the bureaucracy from top to bottom.

The announcement on 24 September 2011 of Putin's intention to return to the Kremlin seems on the outside to signify continuity of the status quo. But in reality this will lead to the same leader with the same view on power being confronted by the new domestic and global circumstances, and the old system will be faced with new risks and challenges with which it is unlikely to be able to cope. The old 'Putin consensus' – based on comparisons with a pathetic, inadequate Yeltsin and constant reminders of how difficult the 1990s were, fuelled by high oil prices, promising uninterrupted economic growth and unlimited resources for a patrimonial state – has started to crumble.⁴

1 'Putin slams NATO on Libya attacks', 26 April 2011, <http://en.rian.ru/world/20110426/163721016.html>.

2 Overall, as the Kremlin announced, total military expenditure in Russia up to 2020 will be \$741 billion. Spending on national defence in 2012 will amount to 14.6% of the budget (in 2013, 17%; in 2014, 18.8%), and on national security and law enforcement it will amount in 2012 to 14.4% (in 2013, 14.4%; in 2014, 14.2%). Spending on the national economy in 2012 will be 14.2% (in 2013, 12.5; in 2014, 11.3%). Putin pledged a \$688 billion increase in military spending until 2020. Education expenditure will amount in 2012 to 4.7% (in 2013, 4%; in 2014, 3.4%) and spending on health care to 4.4% (in 2013, 3.7%; in 2014, 3.2%). 'Proekt Zakona o Federalnom Byudzete 2012–2014 ot 30.09.2011' [A draft law on the 2012–2014 federal budget, 30.09.2011], *Novaya Gazeta*, 11 November 2011.

3 Under Peter III, Catherine the Great, Alexander II and Piotr Stolypin, Russia tried to borrow Western principles of governance. However, these efforts only gave the Russian autocracy a new lease of life.

4 Weeks before the elections, Russians were increasingly voicing their displeasure with the party in power, as reflected in declining poll numbers for United Russia, Putin and Medvedev. In November 2011 only 31% of respondents said they would vote for Putin 'if the elections were held next Sunday', down from 70% in 2005. 'Vybory Prezidenta' [The Presidential Elections], <http://www.levada.ru/25-11-2011/vybory-prezidenta>.

How continuity could rock the boat

Even before the December 2011 protests it was clear that the variables that have so far helped the Russian system stay afloat are now accelerating its decline. The mechanism that Arnold Toynbee defined as 'suicidal statecraft' has gone into action: the system, in attempting to deal with new challenges by using old methods, is undermining itself.

Russia's imitation of democratic institutions, especially the holding of elections, enables the ruling team to keep the regime in place and lay claims to a democratic image. But at the same time, blatant manipulation of democratic institutions that became the trademark of the Putin's regime, such as took place in the 2009 Moscow regional elections and the 2011 Duma elections, started to erode the legitimacy of authorities that have no other mechanisms (in particular inheritance-based or ideological) to justify their hold on power. The fact that more than 72% of Russians before the 2011 Duma elections said that they 'did not have an impact on the outcomes' and 'don't believe anyone', and that the results would be falsified, meant that people have no doubts about the real nature of Russian power.⁵

The commodities-based economy keeps the system propped up while also causing its rot. Russia completely fits the pattern of decline that has befallen other petro-states which had not democratized before their commodities boom began. Tamed and obedient institutions (with a rubber-stamp parliament, courts controlled by the executive power, and rigged elections) ensure an apparent calm, but the lack of channels through which people can express their various interests leaves them with no choice but to take to the streets. For now, the Kremlin's 'carrot and stick' tactic is still working, drawing various parts of society into the authorities' orbit, neutralizing and marginalizing those who reject the status quo. This process of putting society into an induced coma suppresses its energy.

In the absence of legally codified rules, corruption in Russia⁶ became a form of cosy transaction between people, between society and authorities, and for some time guaranteed a mutually accepted way of life. But gradually corruption started to block any decision-making process; it disrupts the presidential pyramid of power. Even more important is the fact a growing part of society rejects the 'transactional pact' with bureaucracy, which instead of guaranteeing stability is triggering popular outrage.

Putin's eventual return to the Kremlin has been matched by efforts to reinforce myths to justify one-man rule. Particular energy has gone into arguing that the 'new' Putin or 'Putin 2.0' will be forced to carry out change, however unwillingly, and therefore must be supported. 'Putin still could become the reformer under pressure of tough reality!'; the fans of personalized power would insist. At the same time the Kremlin ideologues, together with 'systemic liberals' loyal to the Kremlin (for instance Anatolii Chubais, German Gref, Alexei Kudrin or Arkadii Dvorkovich), or those who still sincerely believe in the Kremlin reformist potential, try hard to justify the need for gradual reform from above.⁷

Russia's reality makes these theories look dubious. If Putin is destined to become the transformer of Russian society, why did he not transform it earlier? Certainly, leaders can change their course under pressure but in Russia's case it is a change of system and not simply a change of course that is needed. Russia needs transformation, not reform that could make autocracy more effective. For real transformation to succeed, Putin's team would have to renounce its monopoly on power, which is the main source of the country's degradation, and open itself to competition. It would have to perform political hara-kiri. It is hard to imagine Putin announcing: 'I am leaving and I ask the parliament to reject all repressive laws we endorsed that limit political competition, and we are starting to prepare for new and free elections.'

5 'Vyborny v Dumu' [The Duma Elections], <http://www.levada.ru/25-11-2011/vyborny-v-gosdumu>.

6 According to Transparency International, Russia ranks 143rd out of 183 states, between Uganda and Nigeria, in the Corruption Perceptions Index 2011 (<http://independent-news.ru/?p=18763>). Independent sources claim that since 1992 Russia has lost \$3.17 trillion owing to the corruption of state officials and business people, and during the last few years corruption has accounted for 27% of its GDP (<http://www.korrupt.ru/index.php?s=5&id=341>).

7 See *Russia in the 21st Century: Vision for the Future*, Report of the Institute of Contemporary Development, http://www.insor-russia.ru/files/INSOR%20Russia%20in%20the%2021st%20century_ENG.pdf.

Instead, Putin's intention to return to the Kremlin shows that his team wants to keep hold of its monopoly. For the ruling team, leaving the Kremlin would mean not only losing control of assets but a threat to personal security. There is no doubt that the Russian authorities have followed the events of Arab Spring closely and drawn the conclusion that losing their hold on power risks their ending up like Hosni Mubarak or Muammar Gaddafi. Russia's leaders do not want to become another illustration in the story of how pathetically authoritarianism ends. But the more they keep hold of the Kremlin, the more they make the end inevitable and unpleasant.

As for the idea of authoritarian modernization from above in the economy, the authorities have been attempting to implement it over the last few years, but with what results? How can one carry out economic liberalization while strengthening the state's monopoly and control over the economy? How do you fight corruption if you turn the parliament into a circus and bury independent courts and the media?

One cannot but be amazed at the naivety or idealism of those who continue to believe in gradual reform, as if belief could help this happen. Supporters of the gradual path, for instance, assert that reform should begin in selected areas such as education, healthcare and agriculture, and only then spread further.⁸ But how do you reform these sectors without de-monopolizing them and opening them to competition, and without the rule of law and independent courts? The authorities' continued monopoly on power makes any real reform impossible, even in just these limited sectors.

The authorities' tactical manoeuvres and the myths spread by the Kremlin propagandists can no longer stave off the crisis that has already begun. The system's adaptability has started to wear out. The system cannot guarantee

Russians personal security, further economic wellbeing or a sense of dignity. It works only to satisfy entrenched interest groups at the expense of society. In fact, the status quo in Russia is only speeding up the degeneration of the system. Paradoxically, attempts to update this system by limiting personalized rule threaten to break it down altogether, as happened with the Soviet Union in 1991 when Gorbachev had liquidated the leading role of the Communist party.

The road to the inevitable: too little, too late?

The logic of decay has started its work in Russia and the unchanging leader and ruling team are doing their best to accelerate it. Many of those who at the beginning liked and even worshipped Putin have started to loathe him.⁹ His leadership now reminds people of the Brezhnev era, which in their memory was the prelude to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

One should not forget, either, the fact that Putin's regime does not only rely on the security and law enforcement agencies, but is made up primarily of people who have come from the special services or are close to them.¹⁰ They therefore have an ingrained repressive (or administrative) zeal and are less ready to use political instruments and consensual policy. For the first time in Russia's history, not only are the security agencies free of civilian control, but they have established their own regime. The Russian praetorians – special services operatives turned bureaucrats turned oligarchs – hardly have a modernization agenda on their minds. At first they went after total political control and juicy chunks of property; now they look for survival. The Russian *siloviki* have one purpose – pursuing their corporatist interests at any price and with the utmost cynicism and brutality.¹¹

8 See J. Yasin, 'Scenarios of Russia's Development for the Longer Perspective', Liberal Mission Foundation, 2011, http://www.liberal.ru/upload/files/scenarii_yasin_light.pdf.

9 The change of attitude is reflected in the decline of Putin's percentage approval rating from the 70s to the 40s.

10 Among them are Sergei Ivanov, currently head of the Kremlin administration; Sergei Naryshkin, Chairman of the State Duma; Igor Sechin, Deputy Prime Minister, and Vladimir Yakunin, President of the Russian Railways.

11 For the first time the economic expansion of *siloviki* became the subject for the open debate in 2007 when Oleg Shvartzman, in an interview to *Kommersant* daily, said that he represented the organization founded in 2004 that specializes in the massive takeovers of enterprises and corporations and is supervised by the '*siloviki* bloc' headed by Igor Sechin. *Kommersant*, 30 November, 2007. Anatolii Chubais, commenting on this admission, confirmed that the process of 'stealing the assets under the cover of the power structures is going on' and 'this development is extremely dangerous'; http://altapress.ru/story/13559?story_print=1. With the authorities' growing control of the media channels, the discussion of 'this development' became subdued and the topic is now raised only by the opposition *Novaya Gazeta*.

The authorities' obsession with personal enrichment – especially among those coming from the special services – is another factor accelerating the regime's decline. This obsession makes the regime more repressive as it defends its rights to the assets it has gathered, but at the same time this 'commercialization' of the state's repressive machinery speeds up the system's degeneration and makes it insecure. As a result, the *siloviki* lose their ability to protect the system effectively.

Of course, one should not go too far in viewing the Russian regime as an exclusively Chekist phenomenon. It is an amalgam of the Russian 'Chicago boys' (the Russian liberal technocrats who favour economic reform under authoritarian leadership) and the *siloviki*: the former have been building the Russian economy and managing it, and the latter have been in charge of other functions of the state, including control of the financial flows. Representatives of other social and political groupings play supporting roles. They include the communists who have become the sparring partner of the Kremlin during the elections, giving it anti-communist legitimacy. However, it is the Chekists–systemic liberals axis that is crucial for the survival and economic efficiency of the Russian system, which is discrediting not only liberals in the government, but liberalism as an ideology.

The posture, views and nature of Putin have exerted a crucial impact on the substance and style of the regime. But one should not exaggerate the personal aspect of Russian personalized power. The 'personalizer', i.e. the leader who might occupy various positions, though usually that of president, controls the state resources. At the same time, he is hostage to the growing state bureaucracy, which is his main political base. The existence of a powerful bureaucratic class constrains the authoritarian leader who becomes strait-jacketed by myriad trade-offs and commitments. The leader, of course, could free himself and become an independent ruler by rejecting the bureaucracy and appealing to society. But Putin, apparently, cannot risk this and he continues to stay within the 'bureaucratic-authoritarian' type of political regime. This

does not mean that another putative candidate for the role of Russia's 'saviour' will not try to escape the bureaucratic embrace and offer a purely autocratic model of rule.

The criminalization of the state, which is reflected in the intertwining of crime, business, law enforcement and security agencies, and the authorities, is another sign of decay.¹² Why can the authorities not clean their stables even at tremendous cost to the regime's reputation? It is not that the authorities are implicated in each and every crime, and are trying to dispel suspicions against them, but any clear-out of personnel and any real struggle with crime would undermine the 'power vertical' edifice the Kremlin has built. It would violate the regime's fundamental principle: *in return for their loyalty, those who serve it are guaranteed impunity*. This mutual back-scratching among the authorities and the agencies at their service, and the fusion of power with the criminal world, cannot be eliminated without restructuring the 'presidential vertical' that is based on total rejection of accountability and moral commitments before the nation.

The jailing of oligarchs Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Platon Lebedev in 2003 demonstrated another of the system's fundamental principles: *wield a strong hand!* This explains why, having made the two men an example of his total grip on power, Putin cannot now release them, for this would be perceived as the end of the Putin era. Business has become hostage to the system and can exist only if it plays by the system's rules. But even when it plays by the rules it still cannot protect itself from the authorities and law enforcement agencies, which engage in mass extortion. The use of force against business has become a distinguishing feature of today's Russia, and this makes it impossible to build an effective economy.

How the Russian system is ruining itself

A number of circumstances continue to mitigate and blur the Russian situation, creating the impression that the system can keep going. The commodities economy

¹² The most glaring cases were the rapes, slavery, coercion and murders perpetrated by the gang formed by the member of the pro-Kremlin party connected to local authorities and law enforcement organs in Kuschchevsky town (Kransnodarski region) and the prosecutors' gang in the Moscow region controlling casinos. See <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/society/555.html> and <http://www.gazeta.ru/social/2011/02/16/3527826.shtml>.

continues to pump money into the state budget. The government proclaims decent-looking macroeconomic indicators. The Russian elites, though aware of the self-destructive course the country is on, reassure themselves with the hope that trouble is still a long way off. In any case, they all have guaranteed for themselves safe places far from Russia in the event of a cataclysm. Constant squabbles and in-fighting among opposition groups and figures, egged on by the Kremlin, discredit the opposition. The authorities have managed so far to channel social discontent into nationalist sentiments directed against migrants and people of non-Slavic ethnicity.¹³

The nostalgia for empire still present in parts of the population also mitigates social discontent as quite broad segments of society prefer for now to sit patiently and endure in return for preserving Russia's great-power status and 'areas of interests'.¹⁴ Finally, Russian society's deep-reaching atomization, the destruction of old social and cultural ties, the demoralization and also the growing depression (reflected in alcoholism, a high male death rate, increasing suicide rate and murder rates, the growing number of abortions and degradation of the family as an institution) also hold these broader segments of society back from active protests.

However, the evidence is piling up that the Russian system has a limited lifespan. The question is whether the system will continue to rot or will implode. This dilemma may sound too pessimistic and gloomy (even uncomfortable) for Westerners accustomed to a more civilized narrative and experience. From the outside Russia appears calmer and more predictable, and some even believe that it is evolving in a positive direction. This optimism only highlights how different the inside and outside views are.

Structural deficiencies in the system became more apparent in 2011 and the people have started to realize this. The myth of the sustainability of Putin's Eldorado has been dispelled. In a survey in the autumn of 2011,

43% of respondents said the country 'is moving in the right direction', and 38% said it is 'taking the wrong direction'.¹⁵ The public showed no particular enthusiasm at the news that Putin was seeking a new term in office: 31% of respondents approved the move (these people make up the Putin regime's core support base), 20% were not happy with the idea, and 41% said they had 'no particular feelings about it' (3% did not know).¹⁶ Thus people have started to look at Putin with either indifference or disappointment.

Putin's personal popularity rating may still be high, but this 'Teflon president' phenomenon has its explanations: people in Russia realize that there is only one real institution in the country – the presidency – and part of the population is not ready to abandon it for fear of the chaos that might ensue (though even this institution has been devalued by Medvedev's presidency). However, growing criticism of Putin's government and the country's general policy course shows that people have no real illusions about the regime.

By the end of 2011, 82% of respondents thought that corruption in Russia had increased or stayed at its old level. Almost half of respondents said they had lost rather than gained over the last years, although 51% said that 'life is hard but bearable'.¹⁷ This willingness to endure and look for ways to survive rather than turn to open protest has been until now one of the main reasons for the country's apparent calm. But patience, at least in the big cities, has started to wane. Before the December 2011 Duma elections 25% of respondents said they regarded mass protests as a possibility, and only 21% said they were willing to take part in them. These figures may look negligible, but they mean that millions of people were ready for active protest.

The Russian public has not only become increasingly weary of Putin himself; it has also started to reject the system's basic principles. Only 33% of respondents thought in 2011 that 'power should be concentrated in one pair of strong hands', while 59% took the view that 'society should be built on the foundation of democratic freedom'.¹⁸ In

13 'Kremlin Struggling to Keep Lid on Pandora's Box of Nationalism', 20 December 2010, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62608>.

14 In January 2011 around 78% of respondents expressed their support for Russia's return to the status of 'great empire' (with 14% rejecting this idea), <http://www.levada.ru/09-02-2011/osobyi-put-i-rossiiskaya-imperiya>.

15 'Reitingi odobreniya i doveriya' [The Approval and Trust Ratings], <http://www.levada.ru/30-09-2011/sentyabrskie-reitingi-odobreniya-i-doveriya>.

16 'Vladimir Putin i ego tretii srok' [Vladimir Putin and His Third Term], <http://www.levada.ru/07-10-2011/vladimir-putin-i-ego-tretii-srok>.

17 'Krizis v Rossii' [Crisis in Russia], <http://www.levada.ru/18-10-2011/krizis-v-rossii>.

18 'O blagopoluchii naseleniya i demokracji' [On the Wellbeing of the Population and Democracy], <http://www.levada.ru/press/2011081003.html>.

another poll 24% of respondents said that 'the interests of the authorities and the society coincide' whereas 68% said that they 'do not coincide'.¹⁹

The Russian system cannot even secure the interests of its ruling class, which explains why its numerous representatives prefer to have their 'golden parachutes' outside Russia. Francis Fukuyama has identified two key forms of political decay. The first is the failure of ruling elites to change outmoded institutions and their inability 'to perceive that a failure has taken place'. In Russia the situation is more hopeless: the majority among the elite understands the suicidal path it is on but is unable or not ready to change it. The second form of decay is the process of 'repatrimonialization' by which the ruling elite tries to pass its position on to its children or friends.²⁰ 'The two types of political decay – institutional rigidity and repatrimonialization – oftentimes come together', concludes Fukuyama, 'as patrimonial officials with a large personal stake in the existing system seek to defend it against reform'.²¹ This process is taking place in Russia: politics and business have turned into the family affair of influential clans raised to power during the Yeltsin and Putin years. Neo-patrimonialism helps to secure vested interests but also increases the dysfunctional nature of the system from the standpoint of society as whole.

What prospects for an alternative model?

Looking at Russia from the outside as 2011 gave way to 2012, there were no visible signs of a state about to go into collapse, as was the case in the late 1980s and early 1990s when wages went unpaid, production slumped all round, administration began to break down and crime surged. With the exception of a few large cities, the situation across the country was outwardly rather calm. However, as the

December protests and Putin's dwindling support proved, this calm has been deceptive.

The December awakening was a shock as much for the Kremlin as for the major part of a pundit community that had been feeling the growing frustration and anger but had not expected the outburst so soon in the most prosperous and conformist communities. Just before the unrest, some astute and respected Russian analysts argued that system was 'fundamentally solid and durable', that 'it will not collapse, and it will not radically evolve', and that 'no serious threat to the regime seems likely' because the system 'suits Russian citizens well enough'. Most such conclusions were based on the assumption that Russians found a way to solve their problems individually rather 'than to challenge national institutions collectively'.²²

Another popular assumption was that the elite and the population agreed to play along, following the rules of a game based on opportunism, hoping to be incorporated in the system rather opposing it. It was supposed they silently agreed to give the regime unconditional loyalty in exchange for paternalistic guarantees. It appears that those who put forward such explanations failed to understand that numerous social groups are not ready to make what to the analysts seemed to be a rational choice.

Polling surveys too appeared to fail to detect the change. According to a November 2011 Levada Centre forecast, the Kremlin's United Russia party was expected to get 56% of the vote at the parliamentary elections.²³ While the official results gave United Russia 49.3%,²⁴ in reality it did not received more than 35% and the rest was the result of ballot-rigging.²⁵ This indicates that attitudes towards the regime could be more negative than people are ready to admit openly and that there is much more frustration in society than one would have thought earlier.

19 'O pravakh cheloveka ...' [On Human Rights ...], <http://www.levada.ru/17-11-2011/o-pravakh-cheloveka-interesakh-vlasti-i-obshchestva-v-rossii>.

20 Marina Litvinovich, 'The Power of Families. The Government. Part One' (2011), <http://www.election2012.ru/reports/1/> and http://www.newsru.com/russia/22apr2011/meg_corr.html.

21 Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (London: Profile Books, 2011), pp. 452–54.

22 Vladislav Inozemtsev, 'Neo-Feudalism Explained', *The American Interest*, vol. VI, no. 4, March–April 2011, pp. 73–74.

23 'Vybory v ...' [The Elections to...], <http://www.levada.ru/25-11-2011/vybory-v-gosdumu>.

24 See <http://www.gazeta.ru/maps/elections2011/russia.shtml#0>.

25 *Novaya Gazeta* has published numerous essays describing how the 'fraud machine' has been working. See <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/topics/12.html>.

The protest tide was the spontaneous movement of representatives of the middle class, the expert and media community, intellectuals and the younger generation, mainly in the big cities.²⁶ The protests have had a mostly moral and ethical dimension. After a long silence, the issues of respect for the dignity of individuals and fair rules were introduced into Russian politics, which is a great advance. The fact that part of the glamour class, representatives of the higher echelon of the political and business elite, attended the first rallies proved that, unexpectedly, even they want to be respected and aspire to have a sense of dignity. Beyond a newly emerging thirst for morality, there is a quite rational explanation for this sudden and supposedly irrational non-conformism: the understanding that the Putinist system is not sustainable and will go down. In this situation it is safer to be outside the system and even in the opposite camp, and to let everyone know that one was on the right side when the first wave started. This explains why so many representatives of the ruling elite – oligarchs, bureaucrats, former ministers and political leaders, or their wives or children – were at the rallies.

The first wave of protest, under the slogan 'For Fair Elections', has been a systemic protest. The newly emerged 'angry class' demanded honesty and fairness within the existing system. Soon the protests started to become radicalized, fast acquiring an anti-Putin flavour and becoming an anti-regime protest. However, these developments did not undermine the principle of personalized power and the constitutional framework that supports this type of rule. Moreover, the developments in recent months have demonstrated a longing on the part of various urban groups for new leaders (for instance, blogger Alexei Naval'niy has emerged as the new political star). This still fits the old personalized paradigm of politics in which a charismatic leader is the key mobilizing force that stands above society. The first wave of the 'Russian awakening' happened too early and has hardly had a chance to succeed – if success is viewed in terms not only of getting rid of Putin but of removing the system of personalized power as well in the short term.

Notwithstanding what may happen in the future, there is something new in the Russian political atmosphere – an understanding of the temporary, transitional nature of the current regime and even system, a feeling among broad layers of society that they have no future and are expendable. In fact, in the view of various social groups and even yesterday's apolitical people Putinism (as the leadership and the type of regime) is dead.

For the regime there is no middle road, as some believe. Whatever route Putin takes – liberalization or crackdown – he will lose. The reason is not only that the genie of freedom and the search for fairness is out of the bottle. Even more important is the fact that the people have seen a leader who could be aggressive but whose aggressiveness is a sign of growing impotence.²⁷ The understanding of the inevitability of change and readiness to help it come is the most optimistic and reassuring element in the new Russian reality.

There is also a growing understanding that the change will not come from within the system, that it will be result of political and social pressure on the part of society and not the outcome of any reformist activity by the ruling class. One could wonder, of course, what the impetus for such pressure will be. Could a new rigged election in March 2012 play this role? Or will it be triggered by the decline of oil prices and the piling economic problems? Most likely, the alternative will be born out of a new protest cycle spurred by a combination of political and economic factors.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin is thinking hard about its defensive strategy. During and immediately after the December crisis the authorities at first used violence against the protesters as they had usually done before. But soon the decision-makers realized that they had to change tactics and they rushed into offering a conciliatory package of half-baked changes for the legislature and promises to liberalize party registration. The sudden decision of the oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov to register as a presidential election candidate (and his registration in the role of virtual candidate when opposition representative Grigori

26 According to Levada polls, during the rally on 24 December in Moscow around 44% of the participants in the rally were 'specialists' (experts), 12% were students, 8% were business owners, 8% were heads of businesses with more than 10 people, 9% were heads of businesses with fewer than 10 people, 8% were office staff and the rest were representatives of other social groups. See 'Opros na Sakharova ...' [The Polls at Sakharov ...], <http://www.levada.ru/26-12-2011/opros-na-prospekte-sakharova-24-dekabrya>.

27 Guillermo O'Donnell once called this type of leadership 'impotent omnipotence', in 'Delegative Democracy', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 5, no. 1 (January 1994), p. 59.

Yavlinski was refused registration) and the appearance of Alexei Kudrin with an offer to act as a mediator between the 'street' and Putin showed how desperate the Kremlin was to dilute the protest. It was apparent that the ruling team had decided to stifle the angry crowd by such embraces and to split the opposition, targeting first the liberal-democratic groupings that had been the most vocal protesters. The authorities decided to use promises and an apparent readiness to negotiate to strengthen the voice of cautious opportunists among the opposition. Old tricks no longer work. Ironically, the Kremlin's allies have started to look for ways to cut the leash: the majority of the presidential candidates who until recently were obediently playing their roles in the Kremlin theatre suddenly accepted the demands of the protesters. This shows just how deep the cracks in the system are.

In case the tensions grow the Kremlin has a few other carrots available. It can fire the most disgraced officials; it can start some cleansing of the government corruption; it can even agree to hold new Duma elections.²⁸ But there is one bastion that the Kremlin will never surrender and that is the monopoly hold on power. The ruling team will not surrender Putin either – yet! In case of need, it will be ready to fight for its life. The skyrocketing expenditure on the military and special services suggests that the Kremlin has been oiling the mechanisms of repression.

The delegitimization of the regime continues in the meantime. At the beginning of 2012 Putin and his team still had the support of provincial Russia but that has been dwindling and this process cannot be stopped. In a

situation where the economy is stagnating and financial reserves are depleting fast, Putin would inevitably lose the backing of those still loyal to him – lower-income groups and pensioners. The merger of the revolt of 'advanced' Russia and the protests of 'Soviet Russia' could create a political tsunami. The problem that will emerge soon will be how to bridge the different agendas of these 'two Russias'.

Polls taken at the end of December 2011 showed that around 44% of respondents supported the election protests (41% did not) and that 54% were convinced that the regime used the elections to 'preserve its power'.²⁹ The polls after protest rallies in Moscow showed the growth of the anti-regime moods in the capital – 45.5% of Muscovites supported the protest and 40.5% wanted new parliamentary elections,³⁰ while 29% of Muscovites said they were ready to take part in future protests.³¹ About 63% of Russians said they expected 2012 would not be calm. Nearly 21% said they thought that Russia would see a *coup d'état* and 56% said that rallies and turmoil were a possibility.³² With a sense of foreboding, Russians have been mentally preparing for rough times ahead.

Russia's development in the near term depends on two factors. The first is the extent of resources at the disposal of the regime – its support within society and the financial, administrative and repressive instruments that could be used to prolong its life.³³ So far Putin's regime still has the means to reproduce itself through the presidential elections in March 2012 and sustain itself for some time. But the Kremlin will have to use fraud to guarantee Putin's re-election and this will reduce the legitimacy of the regime even further.

28 The proposed changes that allegedly have to liberalize the political system ('the Medvedev package') in reality will be cosmetic or broaden the Kremlin's room for manoeuvre. The governors' elections, according to Putin, will have to proceed through the 'presidential filter' (apparently the president will pick the candidates for election). The new rules for party registration (instead of 45,000 members the party to be registered will need only 500) will result in a mushrooming of new parties, which will make it easier for the Kremlin to control them. In any case, the new rules will not change the situation because the next Duma elections will take place in 2016. The same could be said about the suggestion to cut the number of signatures needed for the presidential candidate to register from 2 million to 300,000 signatures – the next presidential elections will be held in 2018 and even with the lesser number of signatures the central Electoral Commission could disqualify a candidate if the Kremlin wished this.

29 Georgii Ilichev, 'The December Polls – 2011', *Novaya Gazeta*, 11 January 2012.

30 'Moskvichi o protestnykh' [Muscovites on the protest...], <http://www.levada.ru/22-12-2011/moskvichi-o-protestnykh-mitingakh>.

31 'Moskvichi ob oppozitsii' [Muscovites on Opposition...], <http://www.levada.ru/19-12-2011/moskvichi-ob-oppozitsii-i-aktsiyakh-protesta-vystupleniyakh-v-podderzhku-edinoi-rossii>.

32 'Chego ozhidayut rossiyane' [What do the Russians expect ...], <http://www.levada.ru/29-12-2011/chego-ozhidayut-rossiyane-v-nastupayushchem-godu>.

33 However, the Kremlin hardly could rely on the loyalty of its repressive instruments. Alexei Filatov, Vice-President of the Alfa Anti-Terror Veterans' Association, admitted that according to the polls among the law enforcement organs prepared for the Security Council, about 90% of the rank-and-file officers are critical of the authorities. According to polls conducted by the trade union of the militia veterans among police officers before the Duma elections, a mere 3.8% were planning to vote for United Russia and the rest were going to vote for other parties (mainly for communists). Thus the mood within the 'power structures' is far from loyal with respect to the Kremlin. Alexei Filatov, 'Tichi Bunt Silovikov' [Quiet Revolt of the Siloviki], <http://www.echo.msk.ru/blog/alfafilatov/850938-echo/>, 21 January 2012.

Irrespective of the mechanism used for getting Putin back to the Kremlin, he will face serious economic problems that he cannot solve without solid popular support. The Kremlin might manage these problems if it still enjoyed a dozing society, an oil price bonanza and a Soviet industrial infrastructure that was still working (albeit with problems), but it does not have these safety nets any more. If Putin risks undertaking real economic reform, he will lose his traditional base of provincial Russia, pensioners and the bureaucracy. If he continues with a paternalistic policy, bribing loyalists and allowing his apparatus to rip apart the country, he will accelerate the economic downfall.

The second factor that will influence Russia's trajectory is the readiness of the Russian democratic opposition to consolidate on the basis of a clear strategy that will not only set feasible tactical priorities but will recognize the need for the constitutional change that liquidates the structural basis for autocracy, i.e. the super-presidency. The new Russia has to move from fighting to gain a monopoly on power to the struggle against the very principle of monopolized power. That will help Russian society abandon its centuries-long search for a leader-saviour and realize that it needs fixed rules, not fixers. Regrettably, at the moment the anti-regime mood in society is developing faster than the political opposition can unite, even as parts of society and some opposition forces are still looking around for a new charismatic leader to mobilize them.

Conclusion

We are observing the beginning of the end of the current Russian political regime headed by Putin. The final act could take some time: dismantling the Russian matrix will be a marathon, not a sprint. The regime will fight for survival by using the promise of liberalization as well as intimidation and repression. There are powerful entrenched interests that will support it. When Putin's personal preservation is no longer possible, one cannot discount either a consensual change of leaders among the ruling cabal, with Putin leaving the Kremlin voluntarily, or a palace coup. Besides, the end of the regime does not

mean the end of the system of personalized power – a change at the top could give the system some strength to continue for some time. The demise of the model of personalized power that has been suffocating Russia for centuries can be expected to be painful and to have both hostages and victims.

The first protests can be expected to subside at some point, just as the new ones that will happen in the spring could fizzle out too. Part of the 'angry class' that took to the streets of Moscow may return to their desks if their demands for a fair presidential election in March are partially met. The Kremlin could make the presidential vote in Moscow more or less fair and compensate for lost votes for Putin in provincial Russia where the population could still be forced to accept falsifications. In the end the most pragmatic part of the 'angry class' may agree to a new trade-off with the Kremlin: cosmetic changes in the political system, such as new elections for the Duma eventually, in exchange for renewed loyalty. However, the conformism of the pragmatists is likely to be tentative and short-lived this time. Today they still fear violence and the Kremlin's repression, and many of them may choose to wait and see. But there is no doubt about the pragmatists' rejection of the regime and the leader. They feel the Kremlin's weakness and when the new protest tide comes, they will not hesitate to join it.

Russia will have to go through a political frost and the regime's attempts to tighten the screws. There will be a lot of dramatic falls and ascendancies – some political clans will fade and others will emerge; coalitions will be forged and will split; disappointment with some political forces will lead people to choose 'love affairs' with others. The regime will attack and back off, make reshuffles, promise, threaten and cajole. In a word, the usual tale of agony that has happened so many times in Russia's history will repeat itself. But the feeling is that the agony of Putinism cannot last long – either the regime will take the decisive step and provoke society, or society will take the decisive step on its own.

The only way to transform Russia's system is not only to get rid of the current ruling team but to eliminate the old triad of personalized power, merger between power and business, and imperial ambitions. Powerful pressure from

outside the system will be needed to set a transformation in motion. Moreover, the post-communist elite built a system that lacks constitutional and political means of resolving the conflicts and deadlocks. In this situation revolution could become the only means to displace the rent-seeking stakeholders and restructure the system in order to make it open to the interests of society.

The political and social actors who would be ready to exert this kind of organized pressure have not emerged yet. But the fact that Russian society has started to rise suggests that agents of change will appear sooner than many hoped. They could emerge from among mid-level innovation-linked business, the media community, experts' circles, intellectuals and younger people from the post-Soviet generation. Until recently the authorities prevented any

new political actors from gaining strength by constantly clamping down on or discrediting any sign of opposition activity. However, such attempts on the part of the Kremlin now might only stimulate the creation of a new transformative class.

If Russia fails to build a real alternative to the current regime in the next decade, the system may go into open disintegration. This would greatly complicate attempts to set up new rules based on liberal-democratic principles. The collapse of the old system and public discontent could bring about a repeat of 1991 and see the monopolist tendency simply regenerate itself in a new guise. Russia's political class and society do not have much time to find peaceful ways out of the current dead-end before the system starts to unravel.