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## The Russian Elections – Putin Inc. out of sync?

The outcome seems certain. The Putin-loyal United Russia party will win the parliamentary elections on 4 December this year and Vladimir Putin the presidential election in March 2012. Everyone except perhaps the chairman of the Russian Central Electoral Commission, Vladimir Churov, is convinced that the elections are only a matter of form, designed to confirm Putin's position of power.

Putin's ratings are falling but remain impressive and an intricate web of loyalties between key state officials and top managers of Russia's major companies underpins his position – aptly often referred to as Putin Inc. With Putin as president and later prime minister, the Russian population enjoyed economic growth, political stability and increasing national pride, very much in contrast to Russians' experiences in the 1990s. Furthermore, Putin and his associates have successfully managed political life to the degree that real political alternatives hardly exist. The liberal opposition lack support in public opinion and bicker among themselves rather than concentrating upon trying to consolidate into a strong political alternative.

In spite of Putin's seeming invincibility, Russian politics is anything but boring in 2011. The society is changing and a significant section of its citizens have become increasingly savvy in finding alternative ways of voicing their views, in the absence of independent parties and other political organizations as channels for discontent. A new generation is turning to the Internet for information and debate and, according to the marketing research company comScore, Russia had about 50

million Internet users in September 2011. And, interestingly, recent events suggest that Putin and his associates have become less skilful in reading public sentiment and finding proper ways of exploiting it in order to consolidate their position.

According to most opinion polls, the Russian population's support for both Putin and Dmitrii Medvedev is slowly but steadily decreasing. For example, the Levada Centre reported in November that the difference between those who approved of Putin and those who disapproved had dropped from 57 per cent in October 2010 to 35 per cent in October 2011. Perhaps even more worrying for Russia's political leadership is that trust in institutions has plummeted as well. This does not augur well for the prospects of finding popular support for much-needed reforms after the elections. The exact reasons for these public opinion trends are of course difficult to pinpoint. The economic crisis does not appear to be the main culprit. Instead it has been suggested that the strong economic growth has had the effect of producing a growing middle class that would like to have more of a say in politics. One of the major think-tanks in Russia, the Center for Strategic Research (CSR), produced a study based on focus group research in March 2011 suggesting that a political crisis could be building up. Presenting its follow-up report in November 2011, the CSR appeared even more convinced that the period of political stability in Russia could be coming to an end.

At the same time, Putin, Medvedev and United Russia have experienced a string of less than successful public

relations exercises. The blogger and activist Aleksei Navalnyi suggested in early 2011 that United Russia should really be called the Party of Swindlers and Thiefs. The new name for United Russia quickly gained ground – not least in the Russian Internet community – perhaps mainly because Navalnyi’s suggestion chimed well with how the party had come to be viewed by large sections of the population. United Russia is fighting an uphill battle in trying to change its image and, although it is bound to secure a majority in the next Duma, it will be far from an ideal election locomotive for Putin in the presidential elections.

The last week in October 2011 is probably one that Medvedev would like to forget when it comes to how public relations were managed. He started the week by publishing a clip about a plan to introduce badminton in schools on his video blog. His less-than-athletic appearance with a badminton racket in the clip rapidly produced a storm of comments on the Internet, some of which cannot be translated into polite English. The clip rapidly found its way on to YouTube, where it became one of the most viewed clips that week in Russia – again with untranslatable comments. The same week, a meeting with Moscow youths at the Faculty of Journalism at Moscow State University to promote the view of Russia as a multinational state backfired. Only selected students were allowed into the hall, where the meeting went according to plan and questions were well-rehearsed and generally very appreciative of Medvedev. However, outside a handful of students that tried to protest outside were arrested by the Federal Protection Service (the FSO), officers of which told the arrested students that they would never be allowed to study journalism again. As a result, in one and the same week Medvedev stood out on the Internet as both ridiculous and an enemy of young, independent people dreaming of a career in journalism.

Up until November, Putin had been less accident-prone in his public relations. He is walking a tightrope trying

to come across as dynamic and non-Brezhnevian in spite of being only months away from turning sixty and amidst increasing speculation as to whether the system has stagnated. He has appeared on entertainment programmes on television, made an entrance at a motor cycle rally on a Harley Davidson, albeit on a three-wheeler, and spoken at the annual Seliger youth forum. His major project, though, the attempt to start a new political movement, the All-Russian Popular Front, has not taken off as intended. The way it was presented and even its logotype bring the Soviet Union to mind. So far, only about half of the Russian population appears to have heard of the front at all and even fewer know what it is. The percentage that took a positive view of the front could be counted in single-digit numbers. And on 20 November, Putin seriously misjudged the public mood – on live television. He entered the ring at the Olympic Stadium in Moscow to congratulate the Russian martial arts world champion Fedor Yemelianenko, but was greeted with catcalls as the crowd turned against him. Shouts of “leave!” were clearly audible in the clips available on YouTube the day after.

Putin Inc. is in dire need of new ways of winning the population over as both Russian society and the means of communication are changing rapidly. More is at stake than just winning the upcoming elections. Russia’s political leadership will need support both for itself and for the state institutions they occupy in order to bring about long-overdue reforms after the elections. The jury is still out on whether a political crisis is in fact building up, but Russian politics is definitely interesting again.

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