

The Post-Putin Era Has Started

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Vladimir Putin will undoubtedly be re-elected in the Russian presidential elections on 4 March. In spite of this, the post-Putin era has started. This was recently heralded by Yevgenii Gontmakher, one of the leading scholars of the Institute for Strategic Development (INSOR), a liberal think tank once founded by President Dmitrii Medvedev. After the major 4 February demonstration when the opposition again demanded free and fair elections and a re-run of the disputed parliamentary elections of December 2011, Gontmakher said that the opposition needs to initiate serious discussions concerning a future when Putin has left the political scene in order to maintain the dynamism of the new movement. Although Putin will not leave tomorrow, the opposition needs to work out its strategies, programmes, and policies, he explained and announced the launching of a new website where such discussions could take place – www.vykhodest.ru.

The Russian liberal expert community expects that the protest wave in Russia will not disappear after the presidential elections. It may temporarily decelerate, but over time it will grow. The factors explaining this movement relate to the growth of a middle class, a political system which does not give this group a say in politics, and to a government system with a policy which has become completely obsolete, wrote Mikhail Dmitriev and his colleagues at the Centre for Strategic Analysis, in a report published in November last year, “Socio-Economic Change and Political Transformation in Russia”.

The authorities seem incapable of responding to the new situation. The role Dmitrii Medvedev earlier played – as a potential reformer – had provided hope that political reforms might appear on the government’s agenda. Such hopes disappeared when Medvedev lost all political credibility in September last year, when it was announced not

only that Putin would become the presidential candidate of the United Russia party, but also that this plan had been agreed upon “long ago”. Now Putin is left alone with a government upholding an utterly cautious, status quo-oriented, top-down model for modernizing the country. Few people trust this model.

Putin seems to either ignore or not to understand the seriousness of the situation. His insistence that the new protest movement is a result of Western political technology undermining Russia reflects the fact that he does not understand the fact that Russian society is changing. The statement of the new head of the presidential administration, Putin’s crony Sergei Ivanov, that the protest will end by the time of the 4 March presidential elections also reflects a lack of understanding of the situation. Moreover, the fact that Putin chose to get the “civil society” of highly conservative and patriotic people and organizations to turn out to demonstrate their support for him at the Victory Park on 4 February also seems to fit into this picture of Putin not grasping the situation

Putin is anxious to win the presidential elections in the first round. “Otherwise the country will be destabilized”, he claims. However, if he wins in the first round and believes he has a mandate to continue his previous policy, appoints Medvedev as his premier, and maintains the same old faces at the top, then “Russia in two years will hit the wall with a speed of 140 kilometers an hour”, said Igor Yurgens, the director of INSOR, recently. To his mind, only a government headed by Alexei Kudrin, the finance minister, who resigned in September last year and has now joined the opposition (although remaining a friend of Putin), will save the situation.

The demonstrators coming from the middle class and from highly educated layers of the population are demand-

ing free and fair elections and thereby questioning the very foundation of the present political system. These people will hardly be satisfied with a Kudrin government which remains a hostage of future President Putin.

On 6 February Putin continued publishing his series of articles on issues he finds relevant for his upcoming presidency. In his article “Democracy and the Quality of the State”, published in *Kommersant*, Putin emphasized that “Political competition is the nerve of democracy and is its moving force (dvizhushchaia sila)”. He did not, however, promise deep-going political reform. The package of reforms of the political system he has sent to the Duma and which now is under preparation is far from enough to develop political competition. What Putin did with the political system and the changes he introduced during his eight years as president and four years as premier does not increase his credibility as a reformer of the political system. On the contrary. The newspaper *Kommersant*, obviously also highly sceptical about his promises, published a long list of all his measures regarding the political system, most of which had circumscribed political freedom. It is difficult to believe that Putin now seriously wants to back away from what he himself introduced a few years ago.

In his article, Putin warns of excesses with regard to political competition. In his more specific proposals he is concerned about how people can become better informed, get access to documents on proposals for new laws, and be able to give their views on them. He does not develop proposals on how people themselves can take an active part in politics, discussing alternatives and supporting political parties in free political debate and elections.

The opposition is formed around two social poles, write Dmitriev and his colleagues, first of all around a rapidly growing middle class and its demands for democratization, modernization, and liberal values, but, second, also around lower social layers where people are reacting against the increasing social inequality in society and defending traditional leftist positions on social equality.

Putin ignores the fact that Russia’s socio-economic and political landscape has become highly diversified, and still believes he can address the whole people. In a similar way the United Russia party dreamed about getting the support of 60–70 percent of the voters. However, the political system needs to be changed in order to allow different social and political groups to express their concerns and requests through independent political parties.

Even after winning the upcoming presidential elections, Putin will have to adapt to the new political situation of growing discontent in society, a situation with which he is not at all familiar. If the presidential election goes into a second round, this might help him to understand how the country is changing and force him into taking other political forces into consideration. That is what the liberal expert community hopes for. In any case, 2018 is not far away, and time will prove that not even Putin is a hero of all times.

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The views expressed in this briefing are those of the author and do not necessarily coincide with those of the FOI.