

Russia's 2012 Presidential Election: Yet Another Term for Putin?

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The next presidential election in post-Soviet Russia is scheduled for March 4, 2012. The roster of candidates Russian voters can choose from is rather limited, both in terms of the number of candidates and their backgrounds. The upcoming contest pits five candidates against each other: the Sovietonostalgic chekist, Vladimir Putin; the unreconstructed and unrepentant communist, Gennady Zyuganov; the socialist - and long-time Chairman of the Federation Council (Russia's upper house) - Sergey Mironov, the nominee of the "Just Russia" Party; the infamous, rabid chauvinist, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy; and the "independent" oligarch, Mikhail Prokhorov. Not surprisingly, all these men embody different, yet often overlapping, facets of post-communism. One will notice the conspicuous and telling absence of a conservative, Christian, anti-communist alternative of the Alexander Solzhenitsyn variety.

This seems to correspond with what some have argued to constitute one of the essential features of post-communism (particularly in the former USSR), i.e. an ostensible political pluralism serving as a façade, disguising an establishment jealously guarding the post-communist status quo, and attempting to marginalize threats to it. Thus, the faux pluralism appears designed to

cater to multiple ideological persuasions in society without jeopardizing the main continuities between communism-proper and post-communism, not to mention the privileges, perks, and golden parachutes retained or acquired by the post-communist oligarchy. This is not to claim that the post-bolshevik establishment is a monolith or that no spheres of freedom exist, but that these are significantly limited.

Hence, it is likely that Putin will emerge as the victor of the presidential race, with Zyuganov coming in second, and Mironov, or perhaps Zhirinovskiy, capturing third place. It is probable that the upcoming election will reflect the results of Russia's December 2011 parliamentary election, wherein the pro-Kremlin "United Russia" Party won a majority of seats in the Duma by officially gaining 49.3 percent of the vote at the polls, only a plurality, followed by Zyuganov's orthodox Communists (19.2 percent), Mironov's post-communist social democrats (13.2), and Zhirinovskiy's national-bolshevik Liberal Democratic Party (11.7). It is notable that "United Russia's" support – down from 64 percent in 2007 – represented an important drop in the regime's popularity. Widespread allegations of voter fraud sparked popular anger and led to mass protests throughout the country. But, not all the demonstrators were freedom-loving democrats. Members of Russia's red-brown coalition of unreconstructed communists and neo-Nazis – united by their common socialist totalitarian vision and mutual nostalgia for the Soviet Empire (particularly under Stalin) – were also quite vociferous. Was it being suggested, perhaps, that they are the only alternatives to the Putin system or has a false paradigm been created? Notwithstanding, the Putinist system has so far weathered the storm. It would be, therefore, logical to conclude that if the Kremlin rigged the parliamentary election, it might "fix" the presidential contest as well. The Putin regime has amply demonstrated both an unbending desire to prolong its stay in power – as demonstrated by strengthening of the state apparatus, the presidency, and the position of the ruling party – and a callous willingness to resort to legal tricks and even violence.

Russians protest in the wake of the December 2011 Duma elections

Quite a few have undoubtedly wondered why the Kremlin would expose its own weakness by rigging elections while, simultaneously, guaranteeing itself "only" 49 percent of the vote and a dangerously narrow margin of victory. One explanation has been offered by Andrzej Nowak, a historian at Poland's Jagiellonian University and an expert on Russia. Nowak has argued that a method existed in the Kremlin's apparent madness. The election result was, in fact, the product of a clever maneuver to warn both the West and the Russian population to support Putinism as a "lesser evil" in the face of a greater evil, as represented by Zyuganov or Zhirinovskiy. In other words, the current regime blackmailed the West that it would be wise to appease Russia, and threatened ordinary Russians that they would be smart to accommodate their current masters, lest Stalinists or neo-Nazis seize the reins of power. Although such an approach may appear conspiratorial to Western sensibilities, the history of the Kremlin's secret police seems to support Nowak. For instance, both the KGB and its successor the FSB covertly supported or even

founded fascist or neo-Nazi groups. One of the reasons was to discredit Russian nationalism as a viable, anti-communist alternative. After all, deception constituted a crucial element of the chekist *modus operandi* ... and Vladimir Putin did say that “once a chekist, always a chekist.”

Given the above, Russia most likely faces the specter of at least two more six-year terms for Putin. This means that Putin will retire from the Presidency only in 2024, at the age of 72, assuming that he does not wish to remain the master of the Kremlin even longer than the legal limit. If this rather realistic scenario materializes, Putin’s reign (including his four-year term as Prime Minister) would last for almost twenty-five years, a period shorter than Stalin’s twenty-nine years (1924-1953) and exceeding Leonid Brezhnev’s eighteen years (1964-1982). Nor would Putin’s retirement or eventual death necessarily signal the end of the post-Soviet system he ruthlessly consolidated. In accordance with the country’s political traditions, he might hand-pick his deputy, Dmitry Medvedev (who is thirteen years his junior), or another protégé, as his successor.

Hence, it is a safe bet to expect the continuity of Putinist policies for the foreseeable future. This implies post-communist authoritarianism (“sovereign democracy,” to use Putin’s discourse) at home, and aggressive, post-Soviet neo-imperialism abroad. Hence, it is unlikely that Moscow will any time soon break with such policies as employing the energy weapon to dominate and blackmail, or supporting rogue regimes throughout the world. At best, the post-Soviets might initiate a temporary and insincere effort at *détente*, hoping to either obtain foreign technology and investments, especially now as a member of the WTO, or to diffuse and disarm attempts to develop tougher and more coordinated policies vis-à-vis Russia. Appearances are often deceiving, however. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, many Westerners have observed political developments in Russia/Soviet Union with a naïve hope that “change” (i.e. evolution towards democracy, liberty, and free markets) is imminent and inevitable. After all, is freedom not a universal human desire? Yet, history has continued to mercilessly crush these optimistic illusions.

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