New Uncertainties Enliven Russia’s Election Season

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Russia’s uncensored media, including its huge Runet (Russian-language internet space) and blogosphere, are awash in reportage about the national electoral season now under way. Official television, press outlets, and spin doctors have launched a war of words and images that will extend through voting for the State Duma (the lower house of parliament) on December 4, 2011, and the presidency on March 4, 2012. Members of the political elite are absorbed. International spectators are catching the fever, too.

On the surface, it is odd to see so many smart people worrying about something that ostensibly means so little. Russian elections are not fair and free. Fraud, by way of denial of registration and falsified vote counts, has stained all of them over the past decade, though the magnitude of the distortions is a matter of debate. Vote rigging aside, there has been a methodical bias in the media in favor of approved candidates, and officialdom has dispensed countless indulgences through the so-called “administrative resource.”

The last moderately competitive parliamentary election occurred in 2003, when United Russia, the party of power organized by then-President Vladimir Putin and his Kremlin apparatus, took 38 percent of the popular vote and 50 percent of the seats in the Duma. The legal framework for party activity had been tightened since 2001, with the aim of providing decisive advantages, both electorally and institutionally, to Putin’s supporters. Another tranche of changes ensued after 2003.

Parties were subjected to onerous registration and procedural requirements, the threshold for seating in the Duma was hoisted to 7 percent from 5 percent, and local parliamentary districts were eradicated and a uniform system of closed party lists imposed nationwide. One effect was to purge most of the older parties and erect high barriers to entry for newcomers.

In the Duma election of 2007, with Putin for the first time heading up United Russia’s slate and skullduggery at an all-time high, the party scooped up 64 percent of the officially tallied votes and 70 percent of the seats. Only 11 parties got onto the ballot—down from 43 in 1995—and the number of registered parties soon dwindled to 7. Besides United Russia, two of the seven—the left-of-center Just Russia and the right-of-center Right Cause—were created at the Kremlin’s initiative.

The trend was the same in presidential politics. In the 2000 election, Putin, who took part as the acting head of state, drew a posted 54 percent of the popular vote, but in 2004 he was re-elected with 71 percent. In 2008, while honoring the constitutional limit of two consecutive presidential terms, Putin put his seal of approval on a designated presidential successor, Dmitri Medvedev, a longtime associate from his hometown of St. Petersburg. Medvedev coasted to victory with 70 percent, a whisker less than Putin in 2004. He promptly put forward Putin as prime minister, setting up the duumvirate (most Russians call it the “tandem”) that has presided over the government since.

Whereas Putin had ten rivals in 2000 and five in 2004, Medvedev in 2008 faced only three, symptomatic of an immobile and over-controlled system. Gennadi Zyuganov of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) and Vladimir Zhirinovsky of the populist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) represented mainstream
parties whose fortunes had crested years before. The only claim to fame of the obscure Andrei Bogdanov, widely suspected of being a stalking horse for the authorities, was that he was master of the Masonic Grand Lodge of Russia.

**The Utility of Votes**

There is scant mystery about why Russia is forging ahead with elections in 2011–12, for all their limitations. Even the Soviet bosses held elections, albeit ritualized and uncontested ones. In a dictatorship or in a soft authoritarian setting like the contemporary Russian Federation, the prime benefit of balloting is legitimation of the existing order, a token assertion that leaders govern with the consent of the governed.

There is also some utility in elections as a reliability gauge for minor cogs in the state machine. Most governors of Russian provinces, in particular, are expected to get out the vote for standard bearers of the status quo. A further service is to provide feedback and check the government’s information about public sentiment. “The people who run Russia,” the Moscow bureau chief of *The New York Times* noted recently, “are obsessed with approval ratings.” They make ceaseless use of polling and focus groups, and a national election—if properly managed—is the ultimate opinion poll.

The key to success is precisely the hands-on supervision of the process, a hallmark of Putinism from the beginning. As little as possible was left to chance in the past; 2011–12 will not rewrite the rulebook. The playing field will be tilted, as usual. Tried-and-true techniques are being deployed, along with some enhancements. Foreign watchdogs will again be thwarted. Guidelines transmitted in August for election monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) are obstructive; Medvedev has castigated the OSCE for its “double standards” and pledged to beef up inspections in the region by the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States.

Likewise, would-be contenders from what is styled the “out-of-system opposition” are again being sidelined, no matter what the damage to the credibility of the elections. This summer, the Ministry of Justice refused to list the People’s Freedom Party, an unregistered fusion of several liberal anti-Putin groups, on the December ballot.

Looming over the whole scene is the formidable figure of Prime Minister Putin, whose second hat since 2008 has been that of leader of United Russia. Like it or not, he remains the most admired Russian politician, with a real if pared-down mass base. He is still credited by tens of millions for clipping the wings of “oligarchs” and Chechen rebels, and for bringing about stability, economic recovery, and greater respect for their nation in the world.

Putin’s political coattails are long. For this reason, and because lesser players also have authentic followings, anchored in distinguishable interpretations of Russian politics and political agendas, the electoral game cannot be reduced to a mere charade.

So far as December’s parliamentary election is concerned, there cannot be much suspense about the broad outcome. The latest sounding of the electorate’s mood by the Levada Center, the most trusted independent polling firm, was done in late August. It showed an absolute majority of decided voters, 54 percent, planning to cast ballots for United Russia. The KPRF was far behind at 18 percent. The LDPR sat at 13 percent, Just Russia at 6 percent, and Right Cause at 3 percent; no other party exceeded 1 percent.

Assuming Just Russia, which has fallen out with Kremlin operatives and underwent a leadership shakeup this summer, does come up short of the 7 percent threshold, United Russia would garner 64 percent of the seats in the Duma. Were Just Russia to squeeze in, United Russia would still hold 59 percent, or more than enough to control the floor, the speaker’s office, and the committees.

Right Cause, now chaired by the billionaire and reputed playboy Mikhail Prokhorov (in a sideline, the offshore owner of the New Jersey Nets of the National Basketball Association), is running a slick and well-funded campaign. Should it make the cutoff—Medvedev plainly hopes that it does, and rumor has it that Putin does not object—United Russia’s margin will be shaved some.

**The Top Spot**

Regarding the presidential election five months down the road, the outlook is muddier, partly because it is still unknown whether Medvedev will stand aside for his patron or seek a second term himself. After the hiatus of 2008 to 2012, Putin is entitled to run and serve again. If he is the designated candidate, the polling data, to say nothing of what we know about the logic of the Russian system, make him virtually unbeatable.

The Levada Center’s August poll shows that, if Putin runs, 39 percent of citizens are sure they will cast their votes for him, 21 percent will vote
for another candidate, 28 percent say the decision will depend on circumstances, and 12 percent find it hard to say. To prevail in the first round, Putin would need to find only 11 percent from among the 40 percent whose preferences are unclear. Moreover, of the 21 percent inclined to vote for another candidate, some presumably would prefer Medvedev to be that candidate. Since there is no chance that the two office mates will run against each other, and since Medvedev will endorse Putin if he is the nominee, most pro-Medvedev voters would side with Putin in the crunch.

If Medvedev gets to throw his hat in the ring, the Levada survey suggests he would have to work harder than Putin. Only 28 percent said in August they would definitely vote for him next March, 2 percentage points fewer than those who would go for another candidate; 42 percent would be influenced by circumstances or could not say what they would do.

And yet, quite a few of the 30 percent who like another candidate have to be diehard Putin fans. They and many of the undecideds would heed Putin if he campaigned zealously for Medvedev—which is the only realistic way Medvedev would be in the race in the first place. That presumably would put him over the 50 percent mark, either in the first round or in a subsequent runoff between the first- and second-place finishers in the qualifying round.

Furthermore, there is on the Russian political stage, entry to which has been jealously guarded since 2000, no one presently active who could plausibly upend Medvedev even in a free and fair election—let alone defeat Putin. The All-Russian Public Opinion Institute (VTSIOM) computes a “trust index” for seven or eight prominent national politicians at a time; it is the difference between the percentage indicating trust in that individual and the percentage indicating distrust. In its most up-to-date poll, in August 2011, the average trust rating for Putin and Medvedev was in the high 30s. Only two others earned a positive index—of precisely 1 percentage point—and both of them (the minister for emergency measures and a first deputy prime minister) were Putin loyalists in ministerial posts.

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ervative policies to discontent over underlying economic and socioeconomic problems.

An illuminating measure is the response to a survey question about whether “the country today is going in the right direction,” asked recurrently by Levada since 1996. In the 1990s, when Boris Yeltsin was president, those who thought the country was not going in the right direction outnumbered those who did, sometimes lopsidedly. Under Putin, optimism eclipsed pessimism, and this attitude lingered in the duumvirate period. In August 2008, three months after Medvedev’s inauguration, 55 percent of Russians were optimists and only 29 percent pessimists. The financial crisis temporarily ate into confidence, but as recently as August 2010 51 percent were satisfied with the nation's path, versus 31 percent who were not.

Since then, the mood has darkened markedly. In August 2011, 36 percent thought the country was headed in the right direction and 44 percent that it was headed in the wrong direction. Even progovernment pollsters acknowledge the deterioration in approval levels. For instance, successive canvasses by VTsIOM show that the trust index for Putin has slid from a positive 60 percent at the end of 2008 to 48 percent in August 2010 and 39 percent in August 2011. For Medvedev, it has gone from a high point of 51 percent in August 2009 to 40 in 2010 and 30 in 2011.

In all probability, this tendency is not pronounced enough to endanger the incumbents’ grasp on power. It is disconcerting nonetheless. It has to be especially unsettling for Putin, who cannot help competing against his past performance as much as he is against the opposition.

**Drumming up interest**

The most revealing clue to Putin’s and his allies’ reading of the political temperature is their frenetic effort this year to drum up interest in the impending elections and sympathy with the incumbents’ cause. Showing the way, Putin has been in full pre-election mode since the spring of 2011. One tactic has been to display his physical strength and élan via action-man stunts such as riding a three-wheeled Harley Davidson into a biker festival (helmetless and in a black leather jacket), scuba diving at a Black Sea archeological site, and arm wrestling at a youth camp. Another has been to make his trademark pugnacious, off-the-cuff pronouncements on issues of the day, not excluding national security, which is constitutionally a presidential domain.

Of more consequence, the prime minister, beginning with his annual review of the government’s work in April, has announced a raft of policy initiatives designed to appeal to the material interests of various segments of the electorate. Investment funds, tax breaks, and pork-barrel subsidies have been promised to farmers, students, physicians and nurses, the armed forces, and the aerospace industry. A new Agency for Strategic Initiatives has been formed, with the mission of assisting start-up businesses, young professionals, and “social projects.”

In a more populist vein, Putin in April countered price increases for gasoline by jacking up export taxes on the fuel and threatening to forbid exports outright; in May he suspended passenger car inspections, a well-known corruption trough, for the rest of the year. An updated version of the “Russia 2020” strategy for economic development, first produced in 2008, is due out soon.

Any of these maneuvers would not have been out of place in the electoral cycles of 1999–2000, 2003–4, or 2007–8. The innovation in 2011–12 is the resort to ad hoc techniques that speak to heightened anxiety at the top of the hierarchy. One might have thought that Putin, as architect of United Russia, would have been content to rely on that party as his sole electoral instrument. Instead, on May 6, 2011, in a speech at Volgograd (Stalingrad during World War II), he unveiled a parallel vehicle labeled the All-Russian Popular Front. As if the locale and moniker were not enough to evoke solidarity and rallying around the flag, he explicitly mentioned that “on the eve of May 9 [Victory Day over Nazi Germany] and in Stalingrad such oratory, it seems to me, is appropriate.”

The purpose of the front, Putin asserted, was to enable all persons and political entities that wished it to take part “absolutely equally” in electoral action. “All . . . should have the possibility and right not only to formulate their ideas and suggestions . . . but to put forward their candidates, who may remain nonpartisan but work in unison with [United Russia].” The front was to be an appendage to the purported ruling party but of

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a curious kind—the tool of a freelancing leader
who did not have faith in his home organization’s
ability to carry out the task assigned.

The idea was refined in succeeding weeks in two
ways. First, the Popular Front from June through
August was the site of pre-election “primaries,”
as United Russia at Putin’s instruction assigned
one-fourth of the slots in its Duma electoral list to
the winners of those contests. The primaries were
semi-open affairs, in which multiple office seekers
paraded their virtues in front of party-appointed
“juries” in a sort of political talent show. Putin as
United Russia’s leader will have the final say on
the slate.

Second, the front enlisted in its campaign indi-
viduals through face-to-face recruitment and a
national hotline and, more important, whole or-
ganizations. The enlistees were not slow to come
forth, among them the main lobbies for labor and
business (the Federation of Independent Trade
Unions of Russia and the League of Entrepreneurs
and Industrialists); the Russian Women’s League;
the Russian Union of Afghan War Veterans; the
Russian Railways corporation
(with 1 million workers); the
Post Office (with 380,000);
major private employers (like
the AvtoVAZ car-making
company, the Severstal steel
works, and the ALROSA dia-
mond firm); and regional col-
lectives of university rectors, reserve military of-
ficers, school teachers, and others.

The dreary neo-Soviet overtones are impossible to
miss. Indeed, statements by officials eager to please
higher-ups come close to caricature. “When I of-
fered our collective the chance to consider the ques-
tion of whether to accede to the [Popular Front],”
the director of the Post Office, Aleksandr Kiselev
raved in August, “I counted on support. However, I
did not expect such enthusiasm, activism, and com-
mitment on the part of our employees.”

But what is most intriguing about the “enthusi-
siasm” of the enrollees, genuine or fake, and the
assiduous promotion of the Popular Front in the
official media, is that up to now they have had no
measurable impact on the populace. United Rus-
sia’s attractiveness has if anything edged down-
ward since Putin’s speech in Volgograd.

In the Levada poll in August, respondents were
asked whether they knew of the front. Three per-
cent said they were paying attention to news about
it and 17 percent that they had heard a lot about
it. But many more said they had “heard something
but do not know the essence” of the front (39 per-
cent) or that the first time they had heard of its ex-
istence was in the survey interview (41 percent).

Five percent were strongly positive about the
organization and 29 percent fairly positive, while
24 percent were fairly negative and 10 percent
strongly negative—and 32 percent had no opin-
ion at all. A majority were ignorant of the Popular
Front/United Russia primaries. Asked for a reac-
tion to them, two-thirds were disposed to believe
they were there “to create the appearance of de-
mocracy” or otherwise deceive the people.

PUTIN’S HAND

To detect any prospect for a revival of Russian
democracy at this time, therefore, it is necessary to
turn one’s eyes in another direction entirely. A de-
ocraticizing crossroads could be reached if Medve-
dev—with his liberal speechifying and his mantra
of “modernization”—stepped up and created one.
When his executive partnership with Putin be-
gan, many onlookers saw the pair as a post-Soviet
Tweedledum and Tweedledee. That no longer seems accu-
rate, as an unmistakable gap has arisen between them in
their declared diagnoses and prescriptions regarding the
country’s condition.

But how different are they,
really? Of the two, Medvedev has had the most to
say on the subject. In his fullest discussion, at a
press conference on May 18, 2011, he referred to
Putin and himself as “confederates” (yedinomysh-
lenniki) in accord on fundamental issues, but also
as engaged in benign “competition” (konkurentsi-
ya). Pressed by a journalist to describe their views
on modernization, he put it this way:

[Here] I may have a somewhat different position
from the prime minister’s, because, as I under-
stand it from what he says, he thinks moderniza-
tion is a quiet, gradual process. It is my opinion
that we have the opportunity and resources to
carry out our modernization more quickly, with-
out damaging what has already been done, and
to achieve good results by making a qualitative
step forward. For all this, a lot of effort is re-
quired. As for the rest, it seems to me these are
all minor topics.

Medvedev went on to say that “every person
has the right to his own feelings and his own ap-
proach. But on strategy we are very close, or else
we simply would not be able to work together. And if we were unable to work and our political partnership fell apart, we [in Russia] would face today a different political landscape.“

The last sentence was a not so subtle admission that overt conflict between the two of them could unsettle the wider system, as indeed it could. Verbal sniping, grand-sounding ends tied to timid means, and musing about serious reforms 10 or 15 years down the road—tactics the president has clung to—will not do it. It would take a frontal challenge by Medvedev to remake the nation’s political landscape.

Nothing in his record suggests, though, that Medvedev has the radically contrary worldview and the fire in the belly that would motivate him to risk political suicide so as to raise such a challenge. Having said repeatedly that he covets another term as president, he has been unwilling to take the extra and bold step of irrevocably declaring his candidacy. He will wait, he says, until he and Putin sit down behind closed doors and hash out together who will get the nod.

If that is the procedure, the prime minister will hold almost all the cards when their conversation happens, as it will have to by year’s end. Putin holds the junior position in the pecking order of offices for now but is the senior partner in the relationship. This is so by habit, due to his approval ratings, because of the apparent backing of most of big business, and because of his grip on United Russia, the Duma, and the secret services.

It is not inconceivable that Putin will invite Medvedev to proceed with his blessing to a second election and a second term. Increasingly hard to imagine is that in 2012, any more than in 2008, Putin will be content to withdraw from the political field or take on a tutelary role à la Deng Xiaoping in China or Lee Kwan Yew in Singapore. His avoidance of retirement from active politics would prolong the existence of the tandem, leaving Medvedev no more able than he is now to translate his words about democracy and modernization into deeds. My educated guess is that this formula would suit neither man.

It also would have negative repercussions for the health and durability of the regime. Since 2008 the ceremonial constitution has been out of sync with the actual constitution: Medvedev reigns and Putin rules. If continued, this incongruity between formal authority and informal influence will further personalize the regime and jeopardize its survival after Putin—perhaps sooner. When Putin stepped down in 2008 rather than have the constitution amended to permit him a third consecutive term, he cited over-personalization as an evil to be avoided. Perpetuation of the duumvirate would be a slippery slope leading in the same direction.

The most direct solution would be for Putin to reclaim the presidential suite. This is odds-on the most likely upshot of the election season of 2011–12. Under a constitutional amendment adopted in 2008, the next president will serve a six-year term. If elected in 2012 and reelected in 2018, Putin could be president until 2024, a quarter century after Yeltsin made him his heir.

**AN OPENING?**

Paradoxically, this scenario has the potential to entail a less personalist equilibrium than would continuation of nominal two-man rule, in that it would realign the theory and practice of power. Once back on the Russian Olympus, Putin would possess the option of trying to make changes to the structures and norms of power to help pave the way for eventual democratization. One of the easier things to undertake would be to select a prime minister of reformist bent who, unlike his ex-lieutenant Medvedev, would be an effective doer and implementer.

Putin could begin to craft institutional checks and balances on the chief executive, crucially hard limits on presidential terms served (and not just consecutive terms), and a parliament with much more robust rights of oversight. He could do something meaningful about corruption and property rights and open up Russia more to the global economy. He could authorize founding a public television network emancipated of government minders.

The new/old president could embark on some or all of these projects if he so desired. More of the same will not work forever in Russia. The path ahead if stagnation triumphs would end in the erosion and ultimate breakdown of the system he built. To embrace curbs on his own power, Putin would need to act as much out of character as Medvedev would need to act against instinct in order to confront his benefactor. The chances that Putin will choose the politics of the democratic crossroads are not good, but they are not zero.