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Putin and the new political activism in Russia^(*)

The last three months in Russia have been characterised by a very intense, shifting, and unpredictable internal political dynamics. December protests, following the alleged frauds that marred State Duma elections, represented for the first time in the last twenty years a manifestation of popular activism and interest in the political course of the country. Voters appeared indeed to be more demanding. They wanted to see changes either in personnel or in (the absent) ideology, while parties elected to parliament did not meet these expectations. People's discontent was mostly genuine, not stimulated from abroad although the West supported it afterwards. The fact that rallies have been a domestic product challenges significantly the Kremlin's rule. Changes in Russia's domestic politics still remain an exclusive domain of the political elite's (re)action. Protests did not possess the necessary force and scope to provoke them in a bottom-up manner but they are a signal that a top-down change is urgently required. For this reason, a revolutionary scenario seems unlikely. It

poses much more problems than solutions and is not convenient for any party (neither for the population, nor for the political leadership, nor for the country and the adjacent region, EU included, given the ongoing economic turbulences).

Moreover, the absence of a clear-cut reform agenda as well as of a charismatic and strong leader capable to unite the outside-Duma opposition diminishes significantly the chances that a revolution occurs.

Experts' debates on the future scenarios of development in Russia – status quo and stagnation; authoritarian modernisation; liberal-democratic reform promotion; or revolutionary-democratic reforms – animated further the already lively political post-electoral atmosphere. However, besides any predictions and their questionable realisation as well as questions about the underlying reasons (political, ideological, economic) that led people to take to the streets, what is relevant is that their demands became a sort of requisites for the next presidency. In fact, demonstrators

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Abstract

The unprecedented protests following Russia's 2011 parliamentary elections signalled a declining popular endorsement of Putin's regime. In response to citizens, incumbent Premier and likely winner of 4 March presidential race published a number of articles outlining his electoral platform.

In internal affairs, he shows an apparently accommodating stance promising greater people's participation in politics. However, this is a difficult task to accomplish considering the characteristics of the *power vertical* and Putin's overt disdain for opposition outside the Duma. His goal seems to be to render forms of future discontent more manageable.

Putin is also trying to restore his image and authority by recalling national values and traditions of which he allegedly becomes a fierce defender. It is likely that the next presidency will not be an easy period but rather a turbulent transitional phase of Russia's internal political evolution.

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^(*) The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

succeeded in conveying their message to the federal authorities. In slightly more than a month (between 16 January and 27 February 2012), incumbent Premier Vladimir Putin, the likely winner of the presidential race¹, published seven articles in newspapers with different political orientation² as an expression of his electoral programme and a response to the citizens' demands. This analysis will outline Putin's vision on how the next presidency should engage with Russians within the domestic political domain.

Searching for a dialogue and greater national unity

December 2011 Duma elections showed that Putin did not enjoy any longer the levels of support he did in the previous electoral cycles. It also pointed out that the tandem Dmitri Medvedev-Vladimir Putin, a rather unique governing arrangement, had exhausted its potential to attract supporters. Previously the tandem served the pur-

pose not only to allow Putin to stay in power, but also to preserve and even broaden the basis of his electorate since Medvedev, contrary to Putin, was perceived as a liberal politician. The tandem indeed responded to a "wider range of mutually complementary constituencies"³, but as Medvedev's presidency presented some features of continuity with Putin's ones, its power to unify people declined. Nevertheless, Putin's candidacy is still backed by the majority of Russians. Yet, this seems not enough as it was mainly the so-called middle class, the part of society on which Putin relies the most for the implementation of his policies, to attend the protests. Putin's somewhat delayed electoral campaign reflected entirely the issue of rallies.

As he admitted at the end of his first article *Rossia sosredotachivaetsia – vyzovy, na kotorye my dolzhny otvetit'* (*Russia is concentrating – the challenges to which we must respond*), the series of articles he had published on economic, political, security and foreign policies, should be viewed as an attempt to launch a wider discussion with Russians on his concrete policy proposals. Putin's overall tone when referring to his fellow citizens evokes an apparent willingness to engage in a sincere dialogue (rather than an electoral monologue) among peers on the country's progressive

future. He often addresses Russians using 'We' and, in general, verbs in first person plural. This usage seems twofold. On the one hand, it hints at himself as the personification of the nation's voices, hopes and concerns, as well as of its achievements and sacred aspirations because he is part of that nation.

On the other hand, "We" refers to himself as the core of Russia's political leadership, which has the final say on national politics. Often these two images and dimensions – popular (together with ordinary people and being one of them) and institutional (he and President Medvedev, the government) – merge and blur the reader's perception where one ends and where the other starts. Interestingly enough there is no direct reference to 'you', meaning Russia's opposition; there is no intentional and explicit identification of two contrasting or clashing camps and their respected members as the emphasis is put on the value of being united.

The search for a dialogue with people aims at uniting as many citizens as possible and convincing those who in December showed distrust and dissatisfaction with Putin's leadership. Perhaps Russia's Premier deliberately chose not to react in a harsh manner suppressing violently manifestations, but to openly accept them and build on them his electoral programme. Nothing can be more powerful in politics than using people's demands to legitimise one's own rule. A forced suppression of protests would have only exacerbated disapproval of fed-

¹ The state-run All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion (VTsIOM) predicts presidential candidate Vladimir Putin will win the election in the first round of voting with 58.6% of the vote. The remaining candidates are headed by Communist Party leader Genady Zyuganov with 14.8% of the vote, followed by LDPR leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy with 9.4%, businessman Mikhail Prokhorov with 8.7%, and A Just Russia leader Sergei Mironov trailing the pack with 7.7%. See <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/state-run-poll-has-putin-winning-election-in-first-round/453373.html>.

² The text of all Putin's articles could be found at: <http://www.rg.ru/tema/avtor-Vladimir-Putin/index.html>.

³ F. Shaolei, *Vladimir Putin is the leader who actually leads Russia*, 10 November 2011, <http://valdai.club.com/politics/34480.html> FENG Shaolei.

eral policies and further undermined the image of the political elite. Putin's political centrism needs a durable and broad support by the electorate to be sustainable in the long-term. In his previous presidential terms, "Putin was not simply able to appeal to a variety of constituencies, many of which would be exclusive if his ideas were enunciated more clearly, but the very nature of Putin's centrism acted to reconcile antagonistic and contradictory social programmes. He was thus able to transcend narrow party politics and affiliation with either left or right not by an act of evasion, but by a distinct type of political praxis that transcended the classic political cleavages of the age of modernity"⁴. Today, when society appears more fragmented, greater unity is even more than ever needed.

In the period 2000-2008, Putin was a transitional leader who reasserted and strengthened State prerogatives and structures (following El'tsin's era of decentralisation). His *power vertical* was an exclusively State/politics-oriented system. In addition, the notion of *sovereign democracy* was a justification for greater self-reliance in international relations and an expression of the belief that the country should follow its own evolutionary path and problems arising along that process should be resolved by the country itself. Although both the *power vertical* and *sovereign democracy* did not explicitly reject

democratic principles, in reality democracy was deteriorating because its societal component (namely people's direct participation in politics) was missing.

Medvedev's presidency adhered to the rationale of *power vertical* and *sovereign democracy*. Thus, today the entire political system in Russia appears close and hardly accessible for non-Kremlin's people, leaving little or no space for the development of a new political elite. It lacks a regular dialogue with people and ignores their perceptions, mood, and societal trends. This characteristic has prevented the Kremlin's leadership from timely identifying popular needs/expectations so that at the end manifestations were almost inevitable. December protesters demanded primarily that the Kremlin listens to their voice and that both political and social dimensions in domestic politics are combined for a viable and consensus-driven legitimate governance.

Legitimacy has several nuanced meanings. It refers to Russian people's trust in political authorities and the conviction that what they pursue is good for the nation and it is carried out in accordance with its laws⁵. If people trust their politicians' deeds, elections will be supposedly fair. On the contrary, what we are witnessing now is a lack of trust by some segments of the Russian society vis-à-vis Putin's governance. If he ensured honest and transparent

elections, this would significantly improve confidence in his candidacy and would prove his sincere willingness to introduce changes to the electoral system. Legitimacy also refers to delivering concrete results on specific policies, not only electoral slogans. In the past Putin has indeed identified challenges to Russia's future and advanced workable solutions (also thanks to the favourable economic conditions). This positive experience has been now frequently exploited in his articles as a basis for national unity and evidence of his genuine motivation to contribute one more time to national progress. Finally, besides the domestic dimension, legitimacy has also external implications. A legitimate president enjoys stronger respect in international relations.

The image of a person that is supported by his population averts foreign pressure or interference in internal affairs. This is indeed a sensitive issue for Russia after years of hardly reached rapprochement with the West and its institutions. Moreover, given the unstable political and economic situation around Russia its leadership should ensure domestic stability in order to allow the country to maintain its power on regional and international arena. Hence, legitimacy implies stability.

Is change of the political system possible?

The need to coalesce both political and social dimensions in the political system entails a modification the system's rationale itself. Putin's article *Demokratia i kachestvo gos-*

⁴ Richard Sakwa, *Putin's leadership: character and consequences*, in *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60, 6, 2008, pp. 881-882.

⁵ The reversed question – Does the ruling elite trust people's choices and demands? – is equally important.

*sudarstva (Democracy and the quality of the state)*⁶ displays his positive attitude on a broader involvement of Russian citizens in the state's government. Most importantly, he acknowledges this fact, he shows that he listens to people, to their aspirations and needs, and he respects them. In a rhetorically elegant style, he points out that the new, changed people's demands towards the political elite and the accomplishments of the middle class (beyond their individual wellbeing) are indeed a result of the authorities' hard work in the last decade. «Today the quality of our State lags behind the society's readiness to take part in it. Our civil society became much more mature, active and responsible. We have to update the mechanisms of our democracy. They should involve increased social activeness». Putin even defines what a democracy is. It is the «fundamental right of people to choose their political leadership but also the possibility (*not right – author's emphasis*) to influence continuously the political leadership and the decision-making process. This entails that democracy should envisage mechanisms for constant and direct people's intervention and control over authorities as well as effective channels for reciprocal communication». Further on, the text clarifies that there is a «passive right, i.e. the possibility that a citizen reacts to ideas and projects advanced by political authorities or by the legislative power» and there should be also an

active right, consisting in the «possibility for citizens to shape the legislative agenda, advance their own projects and formulate priorities».

The article contains a number of concrete examples on these changes. In the last months of his presidency, Medvedev advanced a liberal package of political reform proposals to the State Duma dealing with easing the registration procedures of political parties and elections, return to direct elections of governors, and abolition of the need to gather signatures for parties that have federal candidates lists. Putin also foresees discussion within society of all bills, decisions, and programmes adopted at any federal level, an assessment of current laws and the effectiveness of their implementation; as well as reinforcement of the functioning of self-regulatory organisations within civil society. He proposes to introduce a compulsory examination by the parliament of those citizens' initiatives that are supported by not less than 100,000 signatures collected on internet.

Hence Internet becomes a means for dialogue with the citizenry at all levels (federal, regional, municipal) and ideally an evidence of the transparency and public accessibility of Putin's future governance (he speaks of *internet-democracy* and *electronic government* which will disclose to people all necessary information about governmental and municipal authorities' activities). He also advances proposals to strengthen the power and responsibilities at regional and municipal levels.

In the economic field, Putin proposes to reduce significantly the share of the State in certain economic sectors by 2016⁷. It is worth noting that it is the economic factor that in Putin's view determines Russia's leading role in the world. The country should have a diversified economy with a competitive modern technologies-based industry and infrastructure, should be able to attract highly qualified human resources (while reducing dependence on import of western technologies), and possess developed service sector and efficient agriculture. Only such an economy can guarantee to Russia its stability, sovereignty, and wellbeing. Similarly to domestic politics, economic advancement should benefit from the initiative of private Russian economic actors and bestow on them greater participation in national affairs.

While all these proposals are positive, the unsolved question remains whether they will be able to introduce a real breakthrough and change in the current *power vertical* system. How can that system be reformed without provoking a collapse of the State structures or even major disorders? In late December 2011, Putin acknowledged that the Russian political system was imperfect and that he was preparing to improve it. However, he stated that reforms would be evolutionary and gradual, which hints at confirming elements of continuity

⁶ See <http://www.rg.ru/2012/02/06/demokratia.html>.

⁷ Vladimir Putin, *Nam nuzhna novaya ekonomika (We need a new economy)*, in *Vedomosti*, 30 January 2012, <http://www.rg.ru/2012/01/30/putin-ekonomika.html>.

with the current system. The latter became rather rigid so any major alterations risk resonating in all its constituting parts and hence destabilising it. This could be explained with the fact that «as Putin centralised power he imported into the Kremlin the conflicts that in a more pluralistic system are played out in society»⁸. Those conflicts emerged in December. The contradictions and ambiguities of the system have fostered people's discontent. Nowhere Putin speaks of changing the system itself; instead, he uses terms such as *upgrade*, *fine-tune*, but never *change*. Both concepts – *power vertical* and *sovereign democracy* – seem to maintain applicability although minor adjustments may be introduced for two main reasons: to preserve the political system and its functioning (see below party system) and to achieve greater control/access to people's needs so as to be able to react accordingly and timely and avoid future even wider manifestations of dissent.

Overall, such corrections will not resonate on the rationale behind the current system; they will simply make control over it more manageable. Putin has stated this explicitly. For example, while dealing with Russian federalism and the proposal to return to direct popular election of governors, Putin stressed that the President will nevertheless preserve all instruments of control over governors, including the possibility to dismiss them. This stance suggests

that the Centre, namely the Kremlin, will continue to carry out the ultimate (financial and personnel) governability of the country. «The country needs a strong, efficient, based on [people's] respect federal Centre that is a key political stabiliser of the balance of inter-regional, ethnic and religious relations», reads the final paragraph of the section on Russian federalism of the article *Demokratia i kachestvo gossudarstva*. Radically modifying the system in a such turbulent moment in current international affairs would expose Russia to dangerous external influences (Putin knows that he cannot operate in a vacuum). The country has just stabilised its foreign policy (relations with the US and the European Union have been *reset* and foreign policy seems a tool for domestic advancement – see Russia's modernisation partnership with the EU) and Putin has succeeded in persuading the West to abandon its previous “lecturing to its younger partner” attitude. Therefore, allowing possible external interferences would be both risky and harmful. In other words, the main challenge to Putin, as Russia's likely next President, is to synthesise in a harmonised way the foundations of the political system with people's demands.

This suggests another transitional period (to some extent Medvedev's identification as a liberal leader stimulated this trend which now has to find a *modus vivendi* within Russia's internal affairs⁹) and not a

consolidation one which would have occurred had manifestations not taken place.

The missing link – Russia's party system unchanged

The party system is an intrinsic element of the rationale of the political system. The past dominance of the party of power – United Russia (UR) – in the State Duma was the backbone of Putin's regime architecture ensuring that no political threats arise to that regime. After December 2011 elections UR still formally controls the party system and the legislative process (opposition parties sitting in the parliament are often considered as a kind of fictitious opposition). Nevertheless, it cannot control the outside of parliament opposition. That part of society responds to different logic and values. In 2011, Putin created the so-called Russian Popular Front, which transcended the framework of UR and was aimed to unite people with different backgrounds and political orientations, but it did not receive the desired response.

That negative result was the first signal of Putin's declining ability to unite Russia's population as he did in the past. It seems then that citizens' dissent could be moderated by appealing to the implementation of shared values – an element that is present in all Putin's articles (see below) and which plays the role of a connection between the soci-

⁸ R. Sakwa, *Putin's leadership: character and consequences*, cit., p. 883.

⁹ Interestingly enough, liberal personalities were allowed to enter the government system, but liberalism

as such could not become the founding ideology of Russia's political system.

ety and the Kremlin. The systemic rigidity and ideological amorphousness of UR certainly cannot perform that task (even if it undergoes a re-branding process, as some suggested in the beginning of February). It should be noticed that Putin's ambiguous relation to UR (overt support coupled with a lack of formal membership in it) facilitates his actions and confers to him greater room for maneuver in relation to the "management" of values.

Putin's articles intentionally avoid mentioning the opposition, especially not registered one. This is not a sign of political comprehensiveness and it is at odds with his claims to reach all societal parties. To some extent the lack of a clear and appealing alternative to Putin does not put much pressure on him to change the party system. However, this situation is risky because it allows dissenters to gradually mature their political platform in the next years and to challenge the political regime more strongly from outside where Putin is currently weak.

The power of values

Shared values (Russian language, culture, religion, and so on) create integration and render diverse segments of Russia's society more homogenous and easy to be addressed in politics. Reiteration of common Russian values is an incontestable basis on which to build what Putin calls a «new state consciousness» – a state guaranteeing better living and working conditions. While the exact content of the notion remains

obscure to the reader, what is important is an attempt to draw the attention on a mix of values and national interests that, according to the Kremlin, may help solving the current impasse on trust building.

The constant reference to Russian intellectuals, historical personalities and cultural roots in general is particularly striking. Putin's words are presented as an expression of his profound sense of Russianness and as an evidence that his strategies will act within that cultural and political framework. It is also worth noting that the West is approached in a positive way (exception is made in the security field where NATO/US regional and international initiatives continue spurring frictions). The West is depicted as a source for best practices in political and economic domains; it is emphasised that Russia belongs to the European civilization and that Russia should converge and harmonise its legislation and governance practices with international norms and criteria.

The overall feeling when reading the articles is the importance of securing a better future for Russia and Russians. This paramount goal (heightening the electoral rhetoric) permeates all of them along with the idea that it is Putin, who initiates the wider debate on national priorities and long-term choices regarding the country's development. This is indeed the quest for legitimacy of his presidential bid based on values such as stability (both political and economic), societal solidarity, Russia's greatness and State-centrism.

While stability for survival in conditions of economic and political adversity was the main theme of Putin's previous presidencies, now stability returns to be an ordering principle with its primary reference to predictable, peaceful and resilient to challenges development of domestic affairs. The use of adequate resources (in its broadest meaning) will strengthen the country's role and will guarantee progressive advancement.

In Putin's first article (*Rossia sosredotachivaetsia – vyzovy, na kotorye my dolzhny otvetit'*) stable development (i.e. readiness to face and to respond to challenges, to participate in shaping the world processes) is opposed to stagnation (i.e. passive acceptance and/or assistance to global processes). As such, stability allows a gradual evolutionary development of society and economy as well as the success of long-term policies. Stability is also opposed to Russia's cyclical revolutionary drives. The latter interrupt the gradual evolutionary course. The reference to revolutions or unexpected ruptures with a certain political line hints at the protests and the possibility that a radical change may put at risk what the Kremlin sees as a long-term prosperity. Revolutions in Putin's opinion may lead to short-term gains, but sooner or later they will reveal their shortsightedness. Such a statement carries a clear rhetorical content but it also tries to establish a new value (stability) against Russia's path dependency on recurring revolutionary drives. Thus, although acting within the framework of Russia's history,

Putin attempts to break it and adjust it to modern circumstances.

Putin also depicts solidarity, respect for others and the State as such (national interests), unity of citizens, interpersonal trust as another traditional Russian value and calls for its restoration in everyday activities. Referring to national traditions, patriotism and components of culture is a powerful psychological tool to unite people in a moment of uncertainty for the current political leadership but it is a difficult aim to achieve in a society where atomization processes have already begun to undermine the sense of collectiveness.

Finally, in his first article Putin devotes a considerable attention to Russia's greatness (and national pride). It reads that Russia is called to play its due role based on its «civilisational model, great history, geography and cultural gene combining fundamental foundations of the European civilization with a centuries-old experience of interaction with the East, where now new centres of economic and political power arise». Such an approach has concrete repercussions on Russia's foreign policy and notably Putin's proposal for a Eurasian economic union. According to Putin, the country's civilisation and intrinsic features render it the natural core of this project. Russia's uniqueness is linked also to its sovereignty and guarantees for its preservation. In the second article titled *Rossia: nachional'nyi vopros (Russia – the issue of nationalism)*, Putin stresses the basic difference between

Russia and other countries: Russia is neither an ethnic state nor a melting pot like the US, it has its own, unique model – it is a «multinational historical state» and a «multi-ethnic civilization». It is a state built on a long-standing process of mutual adaptation, penetration and union of peoples at all levels of social life. It represents a «unity in diversity», as Putin puts it, where there is a respect for reciprocal obligations but also for shared values of coexistence.

This notion recalls the European Union motto «united in diversity» and somewhat evokes Russia's European roots. Despite commonalities with Europe and thus a natural predisposition to rapprochement to the latter, Putin's Russia retains its distinctiveness; it cannot be merged into other bigger political or cultural «projects» because it constitutes itself such a «project». As a result, Putin continues, Russian people have the great mission to strengthen their civilisation and to safeguard Russia's cultural nucleus. Russia's state-centric tradition serves this purpose because it is through the State and its institutions that national societal outlook and mentality are shaped and passed on generations.

Conclusions

It is very likely that Putin will win March presidential elections although the fight will be serious. The question is *how* he will trump his rivals as well as *what* and *how* of his electoral programme will be implemented. At present, it is evident that he is trying to

reach as many voters as possible emphasising common values and identity as factors of national union, while relying less on ideologies or private interests. Unlike in the past, his future political agenda needs to take into greater account Russian citizens' demands. Much in this process of interplay will depend on the protesters' potential to formulate a concrete alternative to Putin's political agenda for change. So far, the latter is missing. Alone they are unable to reverse the current political system, they are not the conclusion of a process, but the beginning. Their value is the signal that the system should be opened if it is to be rendered stronger and resilient to political and economic provocations. Judging by Putin's electoral programme, he appears willing to launch a dialogue with Russian citizens, meanwhile he also preserves some rigid traits of the system as a whole. Thus, he stresses the need to upgrade it but confirms a general continuity with the past success stories of his and Medvedev's presidencies. He emphasises national uniqueness and Russian values/features that should be protected, while promoting convergence towards Western standards on a selective basis and in accordance with the country's values.

These examples indicate the persistence of ambiguities in today's Russian domestic domain and they indicate that the next presidency will be another transitional (instead of consolidation) phase of political development. In other words, the next years will define the orientation of popu-

lar discontent – a confirmation of the need to have a national leader (with his power structures) or to be led by reform agendas (lesser emphasis on personalities). This is dilemma that Russia's middle class should solve while interacting with the power-centre in order to determine the country's political future.

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