

it would account for a majority within the foreseeable future at the same time as more or less the entire adult population become university or college graduates.

There was another contribution on ‘democracy and the quality of the state’ in the business paper *Kommerstant* on 6 February. There could be no copying of Western forms of democracy; they had hindered economic reform and allowed power to slip into the hands of ‘local and central oligarchic elites’, leading to a ‘covert struggle of clans and a proliferation of semifeudal rent-seeking’. How could they avoid this ‘combination of anarchy and oligarchy’ in the future? One way, certainly, was to involve ordinary people in state management on a continuing basis, such as by an ‘interactive interface’ in government web portals. There should also be a greater role for ‘self-regulating organisations’, in effect civil society. The internet could be used to provide for the public dis-

cussion of draft legislation, or what experts called ‘cloud-sourcing’. And citizens should be able to put forward their own proposals, as in the United Kingdom, where a petition signed by more than 100,000 would normally ensure its discussion within the legislature.

If there is a gap in this agenda of change, it is precisely politics: not respectful petitions from ordinary citizens (who will have to register with the authorities if they wish to make use of the new mechanism), or electronic ‘consultations’, but genuine alternatives advanced by independent parties at competitive elections in a process that rests ultimately on the rule of law. As we head into a new and more turbulent period in Russia’s post-communist politics, it is far from clear that Putin will be able to understand the issues in such terms or that the powerful interests he represents will in any case allow him to do so.

#### *About the Author*

Stephen White is James Bryce Professor at the University of Glasgow, Scotland. His recent publications include *Understanding Russian Politics* (Cambridge, 2011) and *Russia’s Authoritarian Elections* (with others, Routledge, 2012).

#### *Further Reading:*

- Stephen White, *Understanding Russian Politics* (Cambridge, 2011)
- Angus Roxburgh, *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia* (Tauris, 2011)

## ANALYSIS

### Can Putinism Evolve?

By Robert W. Orttung, Zurich

#### **Abstract**

As Vladimir Putin begins what is effectively his fourth term as Russia’s dominant leader, having set the country’s course for the last 12 years, the central question in defining Russia’s future is whether he can define and implement a set of reforms to meet the demands of an increasingly competitive global market place and satisfy the yearnings of a more vocal and assertive civil society in Russia’s main cities. Answering this question requires taking into account the nature of the system Putin has created, his style of political leadership, the effectiveness of key institutions of accountability—particularly the media—and the strength of Russia’s energy-based economy.

#### **Corruption as a System-Defining Feature**

Corruption defines the core of Russia’s political system. Most visibly, many of the people closest to Vladimir Putin during his rise to power have become fabulously wealthy thanks to their access to state-controlled wealth. These people need Putin to remain in office in order to provide a guarantee for their property rights since Russia’s courts clearly would not be able to ensure

that today’s holdings will not be appropriated by other groups once Putin is no longer in office. As a result, Putin is effectively trapped into remaining Russia’s leader.

Beyond the question of a potential redistribution of property is one of personal security. If Putin were to leave office, he would inevitably face calls that he and his closest allies be put on trial for the extensive theft of state property. One viral video on the Russian Inter-

net, for example, depicted Putin standing in the same prosecutorial cage that once held oligarch-turned-political-prisoner Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Protest organizers commonly call the president-elect a “thief.” The fate of Ukraine’s former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and Egypt’s former President Hosni Mubarak, both imprisoned by their successors, must have been front and center in Putin’s thinking when he decided to push aside his loyal sidekick Dmitry Medvedev and personally return to the Kremlin. Putin clearly felt that Medvedev would not be a strong enough leader on his own to guarantee his predecessor’s personal safety the way Putin himself had protected Yeltsin from corruption charges at the end of 1999.

Introducing reforms will ultimately destabilize the system that Putin has built. An appropriate analogy would be to Gorbachev’s efforts to reform the Communist system, which also led to its ultimate collapse. A counterfactual analysis suggests that if Andropov had lived longer or if Gorbachev had not attacked the key Communist Party supports of the system, the Soviet Union could have survived. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union set a precedent that current leaders want to avoid.

That corruption is the defining feature of the Russian system is ironic since the main goal of Putin’s leadership has been to centralize political power in the hands of a few at the top. The pervasive corruption means that effectively the central leaders have little control over the members of the bureaucracy, who effectively work for their own particular interests rather than those of the central state. Despite this glaring problem, Russia’s top leaders have maintained enough control to ensure that they can remain in power. Along these lines, Putin certainly remembers Vladimir Yakovlev’s victory over his [Putin’s] mentor Anatoly Sobchak in the 1996 St. Petersburg mayoral election, a searing defeat that taught Putin not to allow any election in which the outcome was uncertain in advance.

Given the need to protect the status quo property distribution and a fear of implementing any kind of genuine political reform, Putinism cannot evolve from the essential system that is visible today. The key features of the state will remain in place—extensive secret police monitoring of all aspects of society that present a potential threat to the status quo, a resource-based economy whose centralization of assets ensures that there is no economic basis for political pluralism, and a firm grip on the mainstream media. The key goal of this effort is to eliminate the appearance of any substantive opposition.

While it is true that civil society has been increasingly restive in the two capital cities and many provincial centers, the opposition has no way to influence actual policy-making in Russia. The sequence of large

protests in December and February followed by Putin’s decisive ability to win a new term in March demonstrates that the mass mobilization was not sufficient to change the course of the regime. With the elections over, and Putin’s demonstration of tough tactics against the March 5 protests on Moscow’s central Pushkin Square, it will be increasingly difficult to bring large crowds into the streets when potential protesters can plainly see that such demonstrations have no policy impact and are likely to lead to physical confrontation with the police. Russian citizens interested in self-preservation will likely steer clear.

### No Substantial Concessions

As a leader facing a restive society, Putin naturally has to proceed carefully to prevent the loss of his own power or even a revolution that overturns the political system. One possibility would be to make substantial reforms that transform state institutions in line with social demands. As Jack Goldstone points out in his historical analysis of revolutions, the adoption of such concessionary reform programs is extremely rare. Nevertheless, there are several proposals currently being discussed in Russia. Liberal commentators frequently suggest that Putin will not be able to serve out the full six-year term that he has just won, though this speculation seems more like wishful thinking than a viable scenario. Another possibility is holding new parliamentary elections within a year or two that would allow genuine contestation among a variety of parties and create a parliament that reflects Russian society rather than parties that the authorities allow to compete and that have little connection with society. However, given the tone of Putin’s campaign, which largely dismissed the opposition as a product of foreign intervention, and his refusal to debate even his hand-picked opponents on television, there is little reason to believe that serious reform is likely. In fact, Putin has had plenty of opportunities for reform in the past, including during his second term as president and when Medvedev was in the Kremlin. At these times, his power was largely unchallenged and he could have attempted to implement change if he had wanted to. However, no serious political or economic reforms were announced then and there is little reason to believe that reforms adopted “from above” will happen now. Whether the absence of reform reflects a lack of interest on Putin’s part or a tacit recognition of an inability to implement changes that would be unpopular with the bureaucracy and the population, there has been no movement toward reform.

A second possibility is to make concessions that avoid a revolution by meeting some of the protesters’ most pressing and popular concerns, making it possible for

society to “let off steam,” while leaving the political and economic system largely intact. The changes to the political system announced by Medvedev at the end of December seem to fall into this category. The authorities will tinker with the electoral law, as they have done repeatedly in the past, but the main elements of control will remain in place.

The most serious potential reform that Medvedev proposed was direct elections for Russia’s governors. Putin replaced the gubernatorial elections in 2004 with presidential appointments and both he and Medvedev consistently opposed returning to a system of regional executive elections ever since. When Putin abolished the elections, there was little public protest, in part because many people viewed the gubernatorial elections as neither free nor fair and typically brought to power corrupt leaders. However, polls subsequently showed majority popular support for a return to elections so that citizens would at least have some say in how they were governed. As the details of Medvedev’s proposal became clear, however, it was also obvious that the new elections would most likely be limited to candidates that had Kremlin approval. Such a concession allowed the administration to give the appearance of reform without actually giving up control over the political system.

What Putin has sought to avoid is concessions that ultimately reduce the president’s power; any concessions that make him seem weak would ultimately stimulate greater demands for change. However, in some cases Putin has offered fake concessions that have angered the population. In a sense, the Medvedev presidency can be viewed in these terms. By not serving as president for a third term, Putin seemed to signal that he would step out of power and allow his chosen successor to take over. Medvedev articulated a wide variety of reforms, but did not actually implement them. The September 24, 2011, announcement that Putin would return to the Kremlin demonstrated that the plans that Medvedev had discussed would remain on paper. This failure, combined with the obvious fraud in the December elections, led to the explosion of protests in December 2011.

The presidential elections signaled that Putin was not going to make any concessions in his formal return to the country’s top office. The point of the elections was not to demonstrate Putin’s democratic legitimacy, but to show that he could still manipulate the system and demonstrate that his power was unquestionable. Despite the demands of the December protesters, he did not remove the head of the Central Electoral Commission Vladimir Churov. Likewise, the Commission rejected the signatures collected by Grigorii Yavlinsky and did not allow him onto the ballot, presumably because it was conceivable that the opposition would rally around him.

Despite the protests, the presidential elections were little different in their conduct than the parliamentary elections. Even the removal of Vladislav Surkov, the architect of Putin’s political system, could not be seen as a concession since he was quickly replaced by Vyacheslav Volodin, who favors maintaining tight control over the political system.

### **Firm Control Over the Media**

A clear signal that the regime is interested in reform would be a political decision to release the current tight control over Russia’s national television networks. In fact, one of the concessions Medvedev announced at the end of December was the establishment of a public television network that would be an independent broadcaster. If there were such an outlet, it could facilitate a national discussion of strategies for political and economic reform. While such debates take place on the Internet, having them on television would allow them much greater impact on society and the ideas expressed would influence people who do not obtain their information from the Internet.

Instead, during the election, Putin used his monopoly control over the mainstream media to reach his core electorate: rural voters, the urban poor, and residents of the national republics, where his support was far above average. While the media provided some coverage of the December protests and for the first time in many years, a few opposition leaders were allowed to appear in a limited number of national broadcasts, such changes reflected a tactical retreat rather than systemic change. In essence, television continued to promote the idea that Putin was the essential leader for Russia and that any of the alternatives would lead to disaster.

If anything, pressure on the alternative media intensified during the campaign. Ksenia Sobchak, the increasingly opposition-minded celebrity whose father brought Putin into politics, could not continue her talk show on Russian MTV when she sought to include the crusading anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny on one of her programs. The provocative name of the show was “State Department (*Gosdep*)” evoking Putin’s complaint that Russia’s protesters turned out against him after Secretary of State Hilary Clinton had summoned them. Similarly, the Kremlin-friendly owner of radio station Ekho Moskvyy reorganized its board of directors. While the change had little impact on the station’s broadcasting, it sent a signal about who was ultimately in control. Similarly, the authorities placed new pressure on Alexander Lebedev, the banker who provides financial support to the independent newspaper *Novaya gazeta*.

After Putin was apparently publicly booed by a wrestling audience in November, he has reason to fear the

reaction he receives from the well-off urban populations that are increasingly turning against him. The Internet now is filled with derisive attacks on Putin, many of which are transmitted by Navalny's widely-read blog. Recent posts included a variety of anti-Putin posters and entries in a song contest encouraging users to upload homemade anti-Putin videos. While the quality of the singing varied widely, the opposition message was similar throughout.

### **Will Oil Income Be Enough?**

If corruption is the defining feature of Putin's system, oil and natural gas sales provide the financial resources that make it all possible. Commodity sales deliver the rents that Putin can distribute among his elite supporters. They also stimulate the economic growth that makes it possible for the population to experience an improving standard of living. During the 2008 international financial crisis, reserves from earlier energy sales made it possible for increased state spending to cushion the temporary drop in Russian output.

High energy prices after 1973 made it possible for the Soviet Union to continue without economic reform according to the analysis of Yegor Gaidar. Today's high oil prices are providing windfall profits to Russia that also ensure a steady income for the state. But this revenue is vulnerable to the volatility of international energy markets. While energy prices are high now, they may drop precipitously in the future if European and US economic recovery falters. If energy prices drop, it will be harder for Putin to finance the numerous social programs he promised to support during his campaign.

But, even if energy prices remain high, it is not clear that the money they produce will be sufficient to pac-

ify the population. The protesters in Moscow and other cities are typically well educated and well compensated. Their demands are political rather than economic. They seek dignity and a chance to participate in the policy-making process; further economic gains are not at the top of their agenda.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the Putin regime's unwillingness to transform widely discussed reform plans into substantive policies means that the system is unlikely to change much in the foreseeable future. Change will only come if society continues to exert pressure on Russia's leaders. Most likely the time for street demonstrations is passing and now the opposition will need to present an alternative to Putin, both in terms of a leader who can replace him and a set of ideas that can offer a different model of development for Russia. This alternative model will need to focus on building real democratic institutions that hold the leaders accountable, reducing the amount of corruption by allowing the media to conduct independent investigations, and laying the basis for improving the competitiveness of Russia's non-energy sectors.

Obviously, the current opposition cannot present a realistic alternative to Putin. While the disparate elements agree in their desire to remove Putin, they have little common ground in their ideas of what should replace him. Therefore the best-case scenario would be for an opening in the state media, especially television, that would allow a society-wide discussion of what path Russia should take moving forward. Putin's continuing grip on the media, however, suggest that the possibilities for such a discussion taking place are extremely limited.

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