Putin And The Challenge Of The 'Vanguard Of The Bourgeoisie'

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MARK GALEOTTI, JAN 29 2012

Politics have returned to Russia. Russian and foreign observers alike were taken by surprise by the unexpected explosion of a public protest movement after December's parliamentary elections, in which the narrow margin of victory for the dominant United Russia bloc (it won 49.3% of the vote, giving it 53% of the seats) was characterised by many as fraudulent. Their focus became the all-important presidential elections on 4 March, when Vladimir Putin is standing to return to the Kremlin. As of writing, the largest protests took place on 24 December, when more than 80,000 people gathered in Moscow, but the next major event is planned for 4 February and much will rest on how large and organised that proves to be.

The protesters represent a heterogenous mix, from yuppies to Communists, anarchists to nationalists, even ex-paratroopers, but they are united by a frustration with once-and-future-president Vladimir Putin's dominance of the political system and the prevailing culture of corruption and complacence they see him protecting. Strikingly, though, this is primarily a revolution of the middle class. While their numbers include workers and socialites, the protesters are disproportionately younger, better educated and drawn from the intelligentsia and the professions.

In the short term, this 'vanguard of the bourgeoisie,' to adapt Lenin's language, cannot succeed. Barring some extraordinary developments between now and 4 March, Putin will win, and quite possibly in the first round (if he doesn't manage to get more than 50% of the vote then, he'll face off against his highest-polling rival two weeks later). The protesters have Twitter and Facebook, but they are primarily limited to the larger cities and have failed to gain much traction with working class urban or rural voters. They also lack a single leader; even the iconic anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny is something of an unknown quantity, with questions still needing to be answered as to how far his views are infused with nationalism. The only political machine able to match Putin's United Russia bloc to any degree is that of the Communist Party. Despite recent efforts to cultivate a more inclusive and populist image, not least by joining forces with outspoken young radical Sergei Udaltsov's Left Front, it cannot find common cause with the bulk of the middle-class protest movement, nor to be able to broaden its appeal much beyond its traditional 20-25% share of the electorate.

Besides which, Putin still has considerable reserves of popular legitimacy and the United Russia bloc dominates the local political scene, with an army of city and neighbourhood fixers to get the vote out for him. Although the newspapers are strikingly varied in their perspectives, the all-important television channels are solidly under Kremlin influence. As if that was not enough, the Kremlin also has the means to massage the results, regardless of the concession to place cameras in polling stations. It is not that there was probably massive or universal fraud in December. Despite claims of a "theft" of the elections, a comprehensive survey of a number of analyses suggests that it may have amounted to a serious but not massive 5%, probably a good ballpark figure. In many ways the real issue was the slanted state-controlled and -influenced media coverage before election day (the OSCE characterised the elections as "slanted in favour of the ruling party") and the coercion of some electorates in regions such as Chechnya (which returned its usual 99.5% vote for United Russia) and institutions such as the military (where the defence minister reported that 80% of soldiers had voted for United Russia).

If winning the presidential elections is not the real challenge facing Putin, what is? If the only question is whether

Putin wins in the first or second round, or quite what his margin of success will be, then it may seem legitimate to wonder what all the fuss about this so-called 'slavic spring' is about.

First of all, much of Putin's authority has rested on the very sense that he could not be challenged, a self-perpetuating myth that allowed him often to remain aloof from politics. Now he is having to engage more directly in politics, making concessions to some constituencies and attacking others. Win or lose the election, this is demonstrating that his rule rests on no divine right mandate and in the process encouraging many to contemplate what until recently seemed almost unthinkable: a post-Putin future. This heartens radicals, and worries those who, up to now, backed Putin not so much because of affection or affinity, but because his seemed to be the winning side. The possibility of regime change is forcing many to review their long-term plans. Illegal capital flight, for example, remains high and may be increasing as businesspeople and corrupt officials covertly move funds into foreign jurisdictions in case they need to flee the country or weather unfriendly audits. Likewise, in conversations with Russian police officers, I encountered a new sensitivity to following the law when dealing with protests, when once they might not have hesitated to use violence and arbitrary arrest.

The gestures Putin is making to try to appease the protest movements risk alienating his core supporters, not least the 'siloviki' ('men of force') of the military and security apparatus. President Dmitry Medvedev, for example, has announced that local governors would again be elected (they have been directly appointed by the Kremlin since 2005), alarming current incumbents. Similarly, Putin's promises that Russians should expect "a decent life" with improving infrastructure and public service imply that spending might need to be diverted away from his grandiose plans for the military. After all, he has pledged to spend 19.4 trillion rubles ($688 billion) through 2020 on rearmament alone. These extravagant pledges had led to September's resignation of heavyweight finance minister — and close friend of Putin's — Alexei Kudrin.

The sobering truth for Putin is that he needs men like Kudrin able to manage Russia's still lopsided, hydrocarbon-dependent economy. For that matter, he also needs the very middle class now at the forefront of protest in order to modernise and diversify the economy. They are, however, increasingly well-informed, thanks to foreign travel, the internet and a growing integration of the Russian and global economies and increasingly less tolerant of a system which effectively excludes them from meaningful political participation and protects a culture of corruption which they feel disproportionately limits and victimises them.

Potentially, the siloviki could turn against Putin if he fails to protect their interests, just as they tried to oust Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991, but this remains a very outside possibility. It is perhaps more likely that they might try on their own initiative to isolate, divide or discredit the opposition or even stage some provocation in the hope of forcing Putin to harden his line again. The real challenge, though, is more fundamental. Putin will return to the presidency weaker than ever before. His brand of authoritarian rule has in the past rested on buoyant oil and gas revenues, the appeal of stability after the chaos of the post-Soviet 1990s and the support of both the siloviki and technocratic modernisers of the Kudrin stamp. Now, though, the economy needs to diversify and reform to maintain its dynamism; the Yeltsin era is a distant memory; and the technocrats are having trouble reconciling themselves to, in effect, politically and economically underwriting the siloviki.

Can Putin reinvent himself? He has overseen a genuine economic and social liberalisation of much of the economy and life for most Russians is better than ever. In the process, though, he has also created the very forces now challenging him, an educated and politically-active middle class demanding a greater stake in their country. Past Russian rulers, from tsars to Boris Yeltsin, have begun reforms, only to reverse or suspend them when the threat of internal unrest arose, leaving them dangerously incomplete. Whether they would want to think of themselves as Putin's children, and how comfortable he will be acknowledging them as his progeny, this 'vanguard of the bourgeoisie' represent his fundamental dilemma. Will he grudgingly embrace liberalisation and in the process begin to surrender the political privilege he and his closest allies have enjoyed for over a decade? Or will he fall back on his instincts of populist authoritarianism and strengthen his political position in the short term, but in doing so set himself against the liberalising processes which otherwise promise to break an historical vicious circle which has long held this country and its people back?

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