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Putin's No-Participation Pact

By Masha Lipman

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The Russian government, with its solid hold on power, has invariably gotten away with poor performance, inefficiency, corruption and widespread violation of political rights and civil liberties. Polls consistently demonstrate that Russians are not deluded. They routinely respond in surveys that government officials are corrupt and self-serving. According to a poll conducted last summer, 80 percent believe that "many civil servants practically defy the law."

And yet Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has enjoyed high and steady approval ratings for years. A mild drop in early 2011 probably reflected frustration over social injustice and a growing sense of insecurity and uncertainty about the future. Even so, about 70 percent of respondents in a February poll said they approved of Putin's performance. President Dmitry Medvedev's approval ratings are only slightly lower.

Russian leaders' high ratings do not, however, indicate a rational preference for the incumbents over potential contenders. With political competition in Russia eviscerated, comparison and choice are not part of the political left. Rather, these poll numbers are a "vote" for the status quo. They convey a broadly shared sense that political change is not desired, notwithstanding terrorist attacks, technological catastrophes, lawless police, an

unprecedented level of corruption or rigged elections.

During the years of Putin's leadership, the Kremlin has steadily pushed citizens further and further from decision making by virtually dismantling representative institutions. Gubernatorial elections were abolished six years ago, and even elected city mayors have been progressively replaced by appointed officials. Polls routinely indicate that more than 80 percent of Russians believe that they can make no difference in national or even regional affairs.

This system of political alienation is accepted by an overwhelming majority of Russians. Both the masses and the best and the brightest alike show no interest in political participation. Political opposition groups do not attract public support, which makes it easy for the government to suppress them.

Indeed, in the absence of political participation, the government enjoys easy dominance over society. The perennial Russian order — the dominant state and a powerless, fragmented society — remains largely in place.

Twice in the 20th century, the omnipotent Russian state was dramatically weakened: at the beginning, when the Russian Empire collapsed; and at the end, when the Soviet Union collapsed. Both times, however, the traditional pattern of state dominance was quickly re-established.

Although state-society relations in Russia adhere to a traditional pattern, different leaderships have shaped them in different ways. Stalin's regime could be compared to a cruel, sadistic father who keeps his children in a state of fear and submission. Brezhnev's model resembled a bad marriage, exhausted of love or respect, in which the spouses constantly cheat on and take advantage of each other and grab each other's property, though the powerful husband occasionally reminds his wife that he is boss and demands at least a formal pledge of loyalty — or else.

Compared with these two models, Putin's model of state-society relations looks like a divorce, or at least a separation: Each side minds its own business and doesn't interfere with the other's sphere. It is a model best described as a no-participation pact. The Kremlin may have monopolized decision making, but it is largely nonintrusive and enables citizens to live their own lives and pursue their own interests — as long as they do not encroach on the government realm.

Unlike in the Soviet Union, which massively infringed on citizens' private space, Russians today enjoy virtually unlimited individual freedoms. The nonintrusive nature of the government is appreciated. People eagerly engage in their private affairs with little regard for the political realm, which they have willingly abandoned.

Nevertheless, the last 20 years of broad individual freedom and limited civil liberties have generated shifts in Russian society — if not across the board, then certainly among certain groups. In particular, Russians have acquired some organizational and community-building skills. The use of online social networks, for example, has grown faster than in any other country in Europe and has helped create some semblance of a public sphere, with the Russian blogosphere often a venue for angry public expression about social injustice, undeserved

privileges, lawlessness and police impunity.

Socioeconomic protests have also become a feature of Russian life, especially during the economic crisis. Unlike political groups, which attract very limited public support, socioeconomic demands — such as the protests over monetizing pension benefits in 2005 — have repeatedly brought together thousands of people in various parts of the country.

In big cities, moreover, a new urban class is emerging — advanced and modernized Russians with good professional skills who feel at ease in the globalized world. It is mostly due to this group that private charity has developed in recent years.

But despite opportunities for self-expression, community building and activism remain marginal and do not alter or weaken the state's dominance over society. Despite the recent rise in negative public sentiment, protest activity remains fragmented and invariably local in scope and demands.

For now, at least, provincial Russians and the new urban class alike have accepted Putin's no-participation pact. In fact, should events turn out badly, critically-minded and well-informed urban achievers would be most likely to embrace the ultimate form of nonparticipation: emigration. In the current political climate, the more enlightened Russians would rather use their skills and talents for self-fulfillment abroad than be the driving force of Russia's modernization.

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