Misplaced Hopes for Political Change

By [Alexei Bayer](#)

November 27, 2011

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was booed at a wrestling match a week ago, and Russia's liberal intelligentsia felt encouraged. When Putin announced that he would seek another presidential term, disgust around the country was palpable. Over the past two months, it has been reinforced by the buffoonish behavior of the ruling Medvedev-Putin duo, Soviet-style electioneering methods used by the governing United Russia party and heavy-handedness of the police in dispersing peaceful protesters, including Moscow University students.

The web now brims with criticism of the government, from thoughtful analysis to angry and often obscene taunts. The whistles at the wrestling match, a common way for Russians to show displeasure, suggested that criticism may be reaching even wrestling fans, previously considered Putin's supporters.

If enough people heed the calls by the opposition to stay home on Dec. 4 or spoil their ballots, the carefully stage-managed elections to the State Duma could turn into a fiasco for the government.

It is a false hope. The government will do the counting and, given its lukewarm enthusiasm for democracy and disregard for the law, any outcome except the prearranged one is unlikely.

There is an even bigger problem: Russia has genuine opposition parties and several prominent leaders who could have stood against Putin in the presidential election. But even if the voting were free and fair, and the voters resoundingly repudiated both United Russia and Putin, little would change in Russia's political landscape.

I come to this conclusion by observing at close range the workings of American democracy. The American political system is built from the bottom up. Local citizens put themselves forward as candidates for school boards, city councils, judges, small town mayors and the like. Many have no higher political ambitions and often serve without pay. Local governments operate openly, important decisions are made after public discussions and are even put to a referendum. This is the foundation of democracy, and politics at the state and national level rely on such grassroots structures.

Nothing of the kind exists in Russia. Whatever systems were in place a century ago, they were eradicated after the Bolshevik takeover, and party hacks and bureaucrats have been lording over the cowed populace. After the fall of communism, Russians never demanded self-rule at the local level, leaving Soviet-era officials in charge of their lives and letting them control the political process.

Neither elected nor appointed officials in Russia are accountable to voters who elect them or taxpayers who supposedly pay their salaries. Their loyalties lie with their superiors, making officialdom a separate caste, dedicated to its own enrichment and perpetuation of its dominant position. It is very much like the feudal system, except the feudal lord was tied to his estate and had dynastic responsibilities. Instead, Russian bureaucrats have a carpetbagger mentality. It is telling that an extraordinary number of Duma deputies, sent to Moscow to represent their regions, settle in the capital and never go home. Their children do one better: They go abroad.

Putin made matters worse by entrenching this system and allowing officials to steal with impunity, resisting all efforts to introduce openness and transparency into Russia's political and economic system. He also stifled dissent and promoted his former colleagues in the security apparatus. Nevertheless, to hope that a better or more intelligent man, someone more dedicated to the well-being of Russia, could fundamentally change this system is futile. Democracy is the kind of tree that grows from the bottom up, not imposed from the crown down.

Alexei Bayer, a native Muscovite, is a New York-based economist.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.