

# Kremlin in the Headlights

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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In the week after the State Duma elections, many proposals were voiced on how the Kremlin could have defused the tensions that followed and prevented them from culminating in the biggest anti-government rally in Moscow since 1993.

Chief, and most obvious, of those ideas was a partial recount of the Dec. 4 vote, between 10 and 25 percent of which is widely believed to have been rigged, and the punishment of some scapegoats from among regional officials. A shuffle at the Central Elections Commission was also weighed. The removal of its head, Vladimir Churov, who stubbornly dismissed hundreds of grassroots reports of violations as lies, could have placated the masses to the point that the Moscow rally would really only have attracted the 300 people scheduled, not the 25,000-plus who actually turned up.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev were also urged to acknowledge that violations had occurred, and state-owned television was prodded to report them. Some observers suggested that the government should open the door to new faces like Duma deputy and well-known St. Petersburg politician Oksana Dmitriyeva, tipped as a possible Just Russia presidential candidate.

But no such things happened.

Sanctioning the rally on Bolotnaya Ploshchad was the main concession granted to the disgruntled middle class. State-controlled NTV and Channel One did cover the event, finally breaking their deafening silence about opposition protests. But Churov kept his seat and blithely announced that the elections were fair; the ruling tandem failed to concede that the tens of thousands of protesters who rallied — many for the first time — had a valid reason to hit the streets; and A Just Russia passed over Dmitriyeva at a convention Saturday, nominating Sergei Mironov, A Just Russia's long-standing leader and long-time Putin loyalist, as the party's candidate for the presidential election.

As for Putin himself, he spent the week filing paperwork to run for the Kremlin and toured a Caravaggio exhibit at the Pushkin Museum on Tuesday evening, the same time that police were cracking down on protesters and journalists at an unsanctioned rally on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad.

To the untrained eye, it looks like the Kremlin is either sabotaging its own rule or taking a hard stance come hell or high water. But reality is more complex. To some extent, it is the deer-in-the-headlights syndrome. The public has all but withdrawn from politics since 2000, placated by petrodollars. Meanwhile, the current generation of government officials is simply unaccustomed to dealing with people who aren't content with their status as the mute political background for Putin's orchestrated shows. For the first time in his career as national leader, Putin is on the defensive, and he and his team have no standard operational procedures for that.

But for the Kremlin, the issue is also ideological. The political arsenal of the "power vertical" does not include compromise, which is seen as a sign of weakness. This unyielding stance was one key innovation that Putin brought into Russian politics after the 1990s, when the centers of power were many and the federal government had to negotiate with regional officials and powerful businessmen, not boss them around. The current system could be ruined by a sole concession, a precedent that would signal other political players that it is possible to pressure the Kremlin. In a more advanced political culture of checks and balances, players debate, discuss and reason with one another. But the power vertical, which relies on intimidation to get what it needs, was intentionally created with no capability for this kind of maneuvering.

Then there is the question of what the public wants. In short, they want a crackdown on officials: electoral officials accused (with good cause) of rigging the vote; television officials who distort facts in their reporting; and government officials who embezzle state money and get away with it. There are many bureaucrats in Russia, and many of them are passionately loathed. You could say the current class divide is one between state employees, especially the higher-ranking ones, and the rest of the populace.

But those officials are Putin's power base, much like the party bureaucracy was Leonid Brezhnev's, and there is a strong social contract between them and the Kremlin. In exchange for unconditional obedience and loyalty, elements of the power vertical get de facto immunity from prosecution. Putin has never sacrificed loyal subordinates no matter their mistakes. If he starts now, he risks losing their support and isolating himself, with no City Halls to ban

opposition rallies, no judges to fine or jail protesters for 15 days, and no officials to ensure the desired ballot count during the presidential vote in March.

But the Kremlin, as confused as it might be, does realize the need for change. The Bolotnaya Ploshchad rally was sanctioned, after all, and Putin's ideological mastermind, Vladislav Surkov, personally urged the partial dismantlement of the power vertical in a post-election interview.

But cooing noises are not enough. State propagandists insist that public protests pave the way for "color revolutions." But, in fact, it's the stubbornness of the ruling elite that is fueling the discontent. The best — the only — way to prevent any and all revolutions is to react to the people's legitimate grievances and allegations, not to ignore them.

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

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