

A Runoff in March Could Help Legitimize Putin

By [Daniel Treisman](#)

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Since Sept. 24, when Prime Minister Vladimir Putin revealed his plan to return to the Kremlin, it has been an article of faith that he intends to win this year's presidential election in the first round.

To be forced into a runoff election should Putin fail to get 50 percent would be a humiliation. It would invite comparisons to the sick and discredited Boris Yeltsin of 1996, the last incumbent to face this fate.

No longer in command of the political stage, Putin would look diminished, a sorry imitation of the former national leader. The chorus of critics would grow deafening, and even many in his own circle might start to defect.

Persuasive as these considerations may seem, the political landscape has changed fundamentally in the last few weeks. To cling to the old strategy now would be to court

disaster. United Russia's dwindling support, the tens of thousands of protesters and the nosedive in Putin's approval ratings, which was even registered by Kremlin-friendly pollsters like VTsIOM, have together created a new reality.

Suddenly, Putin's best hope for political survival is not to avoid a second round but to embrace it.☒

To see why, consider the following paradox. Even as reports of electoral irregularities have mushroomed over the years, Putin has continued to derive considerable legitimacy from the fact that he could win a completely fair and honest election, something that polls by independent Levada Center have confirmed.

Strangely enough, this "virtual legitimacy" has been a central pillar of his regime. Perhaps support for Putin has been grudging and narrow, based mostly on the country's economic resurgence. Perhaps it has reflected the absence of alternatives, so carefully maintained by the Kremlin's political managers.

Still, even in a squeaky-clean election, Putin would have likely won by a landslide in 2004 and Dmitry Medvedev would have done the same in 2008.

Potential opponents of the Kremlin have been marginalized by the widely shared belief that they were out of tune with the vast majority of Russians. Conformists have had a clear target to conform to.

Now that has changed.

It is likely that Putin will follow his instinct and exploit administrative resources, disqualify would-be challengers and plaster the airwaves with favorable coverage. In this way, he can certainly achieve the desired result. At present, the polls do not even rule out a first-round majority without extraordinary efforts.☒

The problem is what would come after. For the first time, many in both Russia and abroad would believe not just that Putin had manipulated parliamentary elections but that he had actually stolen an election — this time, the presidential vote. A short-run triumph could very well turn out to be a Pyrrhic victory.

To date, predictions of an Orange Revolution in Russia have seemed far-fetched. But that was in the era of virtual legitimacy. A tainted presidential election would offer a powerful new focus for an expanded opposition. Divergent groups with mutually incompatible programs would then find themselves united, as they were on Bolotnaya Ploshchad, by a common sense of having been robbed.

Of course, some dictators survive despite international condemnation and a hostile but repressed population. Force and fear have sometimes worked. The Kims hung on for decades in North Korea, as have Fidel and Raul Castro in Cuba. Alexander Lukashenko has been president in Belarus since 1994.☒

But in states as economically developed and globally integrated as Russia, to rule against the will of much of the urban community is difficult. Odd as it may sound, authoritarianism in modern countries actually requires a considerable element of consent. An increasingly

unpopular Putin, widely denounced for stealing his position, would risk losing the tacit support of the conformist majority and traditional constituency. He would soon come to seem a liability even to his own entourage.

Suppose, by contrast, that Putin fails to win in the first round. This, by itself, would make the election seem more credible. Faced with a runoff between Putin and Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov, the majority of Russians would then almost certainly plump for the former — at the very least, as the lesser evil.

Voters might feel the choice was forced, as some surely did when offered a match-up between Yeltsin and Zyuganov in 1996. Nevertheless, they would have chosen. And, in doing so, they would give Putin — even a Putin with plunging ratings — a measure of constitutional legitimacy.

Such legitimacy can make all the difference when an unpopular government must govern without easy options in an unstable economic environment. It is possible that oil prices will surge, enabling even a highly illegitimate government to buy support. But that does not seem likely.

Of course, there is one danger for the Kremlin in this scenario. It is one matter if Putin were to run against Zyuganov or the equally unelectable Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party. But if Putin were to run against a more moderate figure — Just Russia leader Sergei Mironov or Yabloko leader Grigory Yavlinsky — Putin might lose.

Thus, fearing or anticipating a second round, the Kremlin has reason to support the entry of liberals who can split the opposition. So long as candidates such as billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov or Yavlinsky do not steal votes from the Communists, which is unlikely, their participation will help ensure a Putin-Zyuganov runoff while simultaneously rendering the elections more respectable. In these conditions, registering more liberals is not a concession. It is a Kremlin survival strategy.

My guess is that the Kremlin will not recognize this logic. Recent months suggest that its political operatives are painfully short of ideas. The incomprehensible atavism of Putin's All-Russia People's Front is a case in point. Faced with the choice between intelligent maneuvering to buy time and doubling up on counterproductive conservatism, they seem primed to choose the latter. If so, we can expect the dirtiest election in Russian history and a turbulent aftermath with a serious chance of complete decomposition of the Putin regime.

Daniel Treisman is professor of political science at the University of California, Los Angeles, and author of "The Return: Russia's Journey from Gorbachev to Medvedev."

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