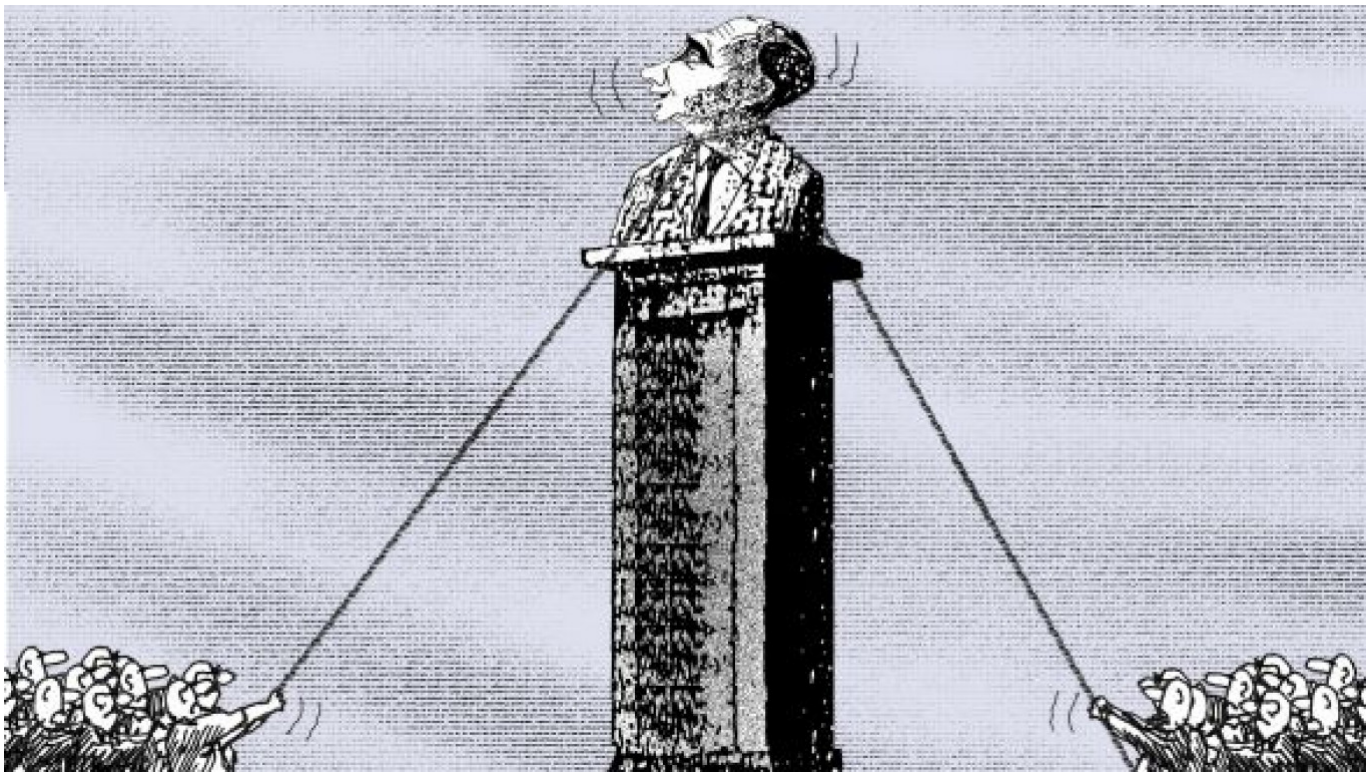
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Between Change and Status Quo

By Victor Davidoff

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Although presidential campaigns in Russia are peculiar — the winner is known long before election day — they do have some normal features, like billboards, photoshopped cartoons of candidates and jokes. For example:

Question: What updates can users expect with the release of the program Putin 2.0?

Answer: Putin-uninstall.exe, and then Putin-delete.exe.

The Russian blogosphere has suddenly got filled with jokes like that and also photoshoped cartoon images of Putin. There was even an online music video competition with cash prizes. The song "Our Madhouse Votes for Putin" came in as the winner with more than 1 million views on YouTube.

Internet pranksters had a field day on Thursday when the Putin campaign team launched the site putin2012.ru. The site presents the candidate's draft program, with the final version set to be released in February. The text is an abridged version of the program of the All-Russia People's Front and differs considerably from United Russia's previous platform. In fact,

the draft barely mentions United Russia at all.

After journalist Oleg Kozyrev studied the draft, he wrote on his LiveJournal blog: "I didn't find a single mention of United Russia. I didn't see a single photo of the prime minister with the United Russia logo. Putin has erased United Russia from his life."

This is a smart move by the Putin team, since United Russia is now almost universally known as the "party of crooks and thieves."

But the most interesting part of the site is where people can write in their proposals for Putin and others can vote on them or "like" them. The web site designers probably didn't expect that right after the site was initiated, a post supposedly placed by "Svetlana Sorokina" had the highest rating. The real Svetlana Sorokina, a prominent radio and television journalist, denies that she wrote the post, but she did note on her LiveJournal blog that the "suggestion is really interesting."

The post read, "To keep the situation from exploding into revolution, I propose that you withdraw your candidacy for president."

In an hour, this and all similar posts disappeared. Dmitry Peskov, Putin's spokesman, responded to accusations of censorship with the assertion that the site was simply having a hard time keeping up with all the traffic. A little later, most of the critical posts reappeared, but the system shutdown somehow affected the server's ability to count. All the negative comments appeared at the end of the ratings list, regardless of the number of "likes." At the top were now proposals to ban foreign funding of nongovernmental organizations, return the death sentence and shut down a number of television channels, including MTV.

Anonymous hackers did their own job and managed to retrieve all the posts. (A list of these posts is available for download here and here.) All in all, the posts make a strange impression. As could be expected, the bulk of them repeat the usual list of citizens' complaints about corruption, bad roads and high utility rates. Others are devoted to spiritual matters, such as the curious suggestion to give the Moscow patriarch the same status as the pope. The author is probably unaware that the source of papal authority is from an office much higher than the Kremlin.

But the political comments are roughly evenly divided between polar points of view. The top-rated comments are along these lines: "I propose that you withdraw your candidacy. This would be the most useful thing you could do for your country. Your leadership prevents the country from developing and ensures only the stability of a corrupt and stagnant system."

At the other end of the spectrum, many comments support Putin because "in these days of war and conflict, Russia needs a firm hand more than ever!"

These posts include a number of proposals that are very familiar to anyone who ever lived in the Soviet Union: For example, "Please censor the mass media" and "People must be held accountable for their public statements, including teachers in universities and schools who lie about the activities of the authorities." There was even the radical proposal to "get rid of democracy. It corrupts us."

These proposals, you could argue, reflect the mood in the country better than opinion polls. A good part of the population is looking forward to change, while the other part is tenaciously hanging on to the status quo. History has shown that this kind of equilibrium is extremely unstable and leads to major political change in the short run.

But the question is: What kind of change? Will change be positive, or will the candidate only hear calls to "get rid of democracy"?

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