

# In New Tact, Putin Courts Middle Class

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January 16, 2012

**The  Moscow Times**

Trying to win back the hearts and minds of people he until recently dismissed, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin appealed Monday to the middle-class voters who took to the streets in protest last month, to help sweep him back into office as president in March.

Writing in the pages of the pro-Kremlin newspaper Izvestia, Putin explained that he fully understood what had made people so angry, driving tens of thousands to join in several large-scale protests against alleged vote fraud that took place around the country in December.

"There can't be real democracy without policies accepted by the majority of the population and that reflect the interests of this majority," Putin said in the article laying out his political program in the paper's Monday edition.

Coming just a month after Putin scoffed at the rallies during his annual televised public question-and-answer session — in which he joked that the white ribbons protesters wore resembled "condoms" — the change in tune may reflect Putin's acceptance of the harsh political reality he faces.

"The middle class are the people who can engage in policy. As a rule, their education level allows them to take a responsible approach toward the candidates and to 'vote from the heart,'" Putin said, counting such voters as representing up to 30 percent of the population.

But political analysts and opposition leaders said Putin's repeated mantra of how he brought stability to the country offers no new solutions to issues that have outraged the middle class, like corruption and tightened Kremlin control over the media.

Yabloko party chairman Sergei Mitrokhin described Putin's article as a direct "overture to the middle class," while dismissing it as "a very intelligent publicity stunt."

"His advisers told him that the old program of United Russia would not work because it is aimed at pensioners," Mitrokhin told a news conference held by opposition politicians Monday.

Political commentators noted that the phrase "vote from the heart" in Putin's article echoed the 1996 campaign slogan of his predecessor Boris Yeltsin in his run against Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov.

But while Zyuganov still remains Putin's most serious opponent in the March election, analysts said he wouldn't be able to use the same anti-Communist rhetoric.

"Zyuganov might be an old guy, but he is surrounded by modern people who understand modern realities," said Mark Feigin, a political commentator and member of the Solidarnost opposition movement.

Feigin said the Russian middle class "has grown fat enough" in the past few years and is ready to challenge the status quo.

Putin, however, repeated in the article that he is unwilling to speak to the opposition unless it emerges as a consolidated force.

"What should we talk about? How to establish power? To give it to 'better people'? What's next?" Putin wrote.

Feigin said this showed that Putin was not interested in talking to people who don't share his agenda.

"He always believes that he symbolizes a power that must be left to someone, but this is not a succession of the throne. The new agenda will be created through compromises," Feigin said.

Presenting himself as a steady-handed statesman during a stormy political time, Putin called his article "Russia is Concentrating" — quoting 19th-century Foreign Minister Prince Alexander Gorchakov, who used the phrase following the country's devastating defeat in the Crimean War to represent a period of spiritual renewal.

"It is a nice metaphor. Gorchakov was saying Russia is trying to concentrate on both stability and development. By saying this, Putin is trying to react to Russian society's demand for a tandem of both stability and development," said Iosif Diskin, a sociologist and member of the

Public Chamber.

Diskin said it would be difficult, however, for Putin and his team to manage both.

"Progressive people and conservatives do not always have the best relationship," he said.

Putin also said he intends to create better conditions for the ambitious younger generation, promising to create 25 million new jobs in the technology sector.

Speaking at the news conference alongside Mitrokhin, Yabloko founder Grigory Yavlinsky, who intends to run in the March 4 presidential race, said he was not impressed by Putin's new agenda, calling it a repeat of the promises he made during his 12 years in office.

"At least he could have explained why he failed to do this," Mitrokhin joked. "Then it would have been interesting to read the article."

Putin's message was met with a mixed response from the hundreds of Izvestia readers who left comments on the paper's web site Monday. Even those who praised Putin on the issue of stability said they were "fed up" with corruption.

One woman, who left only her first name Lyudmila, said the Putin government should be ashamed of its corruption practices. She also accused Putin of rudeness and of holding a "firm belief in his own sainthood."

"The country is ashamed, and this shame is driving people onto the streets!" she said, explaining why she felt tens of thousands had massed at the anti-vote fraud protests in cities around Russia in December.

Staff writer Natalya Krainova contributed to this report.

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