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2012 Predictions

By Richard Lourie

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In a column a year ago, I made a few predictions about Russia in 2011, promising to check on them a year later.

I had no doubt that Vladimir Putin would run for president again, writing that "Putin did not have the presidential term lengthened from four to six years so that another man could make use of it."

One measure of Putin's hubris is that when his rubber-stamp party had the Constitution-amending majority in parliament, he did not change the wording that limits a president to no more than two consecutive terms. Putin is thus now eligible for two consecutive six-year terms and, after a six-year interval, could run for another 12. That's unlikely, but the real danger is down the road. Other leaders, starting at the mandatory minimum age of 35, could rule for 12 years, take a six-year break as prime minister, then come back for another 12 and still only be 65.

I also predicted that the Russian economy would "have a strong year, growing by at least 5

percent." According to the latest available figures, the growth rate was 4 percent in 2011. That's hardly wildly off but still is 20 percent less than I predicted.

I also forecast that the "real danger to the Putin/Medvedev status quo in 2011 will not be the liberals, who are few and ineffectual — or Islamist terrorists, who are also few but who can be lethally effective. A new type — nerdy skinhead hackers — will also begin to bedevil the regime."

Obviously, this does not truly describe all the tens of thousands who took to the streets of Moscow in December, yet my stab does have a sort of blurred intuitive truth to it. Alexei Navalny, the 35 year-old anti-corruption lawyer and popular blogger who has been called "the only electable Russian," was the December movement's inspiration and leader.

It was Navalny who coined the phrase "party of crooks and thieves" that stuck to United Russia like a magnet bomb. Navalny is not a skinhead, although he does keep his hair closely cropped, and hair is always a statement. Unlike much of the liberal intelligentsia, however, Navalny easily consorts with nationalists and shares many of their views.

The "nerdy" element was definitely present in the December demonstrations. As Navalny himself said at one of them: "They can call us 'microbloggers' or 'network hamsters!' I am a network hamster, and I will slit the throats of these cattle!"

Yuppie types — sometimes called "office plankton" — also came out onto the streets for the first time, having previously been too busy with their careers and pleasures to pay attention to politics.

Essentially, the social contract that had ruled Russia for the first decade of the 21st century — do what you want but stay out of politics — had been broken. For many people, especially the young, the idea of another imposed presidency was simply too humiliating. The idea of 12 more years of Putin and Co. became simply unbearable.

Now, whenever I try to divine Russia's future, my crystal ball turns murky, turbulent and opaque. One thing, though, is clear: In the next three or four years, the fate of the new, semifree, post-Soviet Russia will be decided once and for all.

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