

Analysis: Expectations Have Changed, but Has Putin?

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One day after the third massive anti-government protest, expectations differed widely over if and how they may affect the country's future.

The organizers of Saturday's march to Bolotnaya Ploshchad naturally prided themselves on having brought out tens of thousands of opposition-minded people despite temperatures that put the city in a deep freeze.

"When I saw minus 22 degrees celsius on the thermometer in the morning, I thought not more than [10,000] or [15,000] will come. Thank God I was so wrong," Boris Nemtsov of the unregistered Party of People's Freedom [wrote](#) in a blog post headlined "Grandiose Success."

Leading liberal Leonid Gozman jubilantly declared that Putin's political system was terminally ill.

"People on Bolotnaya and tens of millions in solidarity with them won't live under such a government. It's like a sick man whom the doctor tells he will die. We don't know when — tomorrow or in a week — but there is no hope for recovery," he [wrote](#) in his LiveJournal.

State Duma Deputy Ilya Ponomaryov said organizers' efforts were fully rewarded.

"Not just did we overcome the frost, we also managed to gather more people despite the more than a month-long gap," he told The Moscow Times, referring to the hiatus since the last protest on Dec 24.

Ponomaryov, who is a lawmaker for the Just Russia party but sits on the organizing committee as representative of his own citizens' movement, added that the government could not ignore the protesters' demands.

"I expect them to react, not directly but indirectly, just like after the December protests," he [said](#) by telephone from London, where he was for talks to set up a new anti-corruption network called Stopvor.

Ponomaryov was referring to the set of political reforms announced by Dmitry Medvedev in his Dec. 22 presidential address. Although the president did not say this explicitly, the liberal reforms are widely seen as concessions to the protests that broke out after accusations of widespread fraud at the Dec. 4 Duma elections.

But not everybody agreed that the latest protests could trigger anything similar to that.

Most analysts interviewed for this article said Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who is standing in the March 4 presidential election, is unlikely to change course for now.

Nikolai Zlobin of the Washington-based World Security Institute argued that the prime minister will focus his campaign on the provincial, less affluent and less educated electorate.

"He will try to win as the candidate with the biggest social spending," he said.

Opinion polls predict that Putin can win more than 50 percent, making a second round unnecessary.

Zlobin said the biggest challenge will begin after he is inaugurated president in May, if Putin resists further reforms.

"I think he does not understand the scope of the reforms necessary," he said.

Gleb Pavlovsky, a former Kremlin adviser, agreed that Putin faces unprecedented problems after re-election.

"He will face an influential domestic minority that doubts his legitimacy, and what is more, managed democracy no longer works," he said.

United Russia officials took a tough line versus the protesters by arguing that the pro-Putin rally on Poklonnaya Gora and many others throughout the country were bigger than the opposition protests, showing the scale of support for the prime minister.

Independent observers say that the city's pro-Putin rally was attended by far less than 50,000, and opposition activists pointed to reports that suggest that many participants were bused and even paid for attendance.

Zlobin said he viewed both of Saturday's big rallies as failures.

"A government that needs mass protest for its support demonstrates its own weakness," he argued, adding that the opposition rally lacked ideas and clear leaders. "In Russia, both government and opposition are headed for midlife crisis. Both feel their old age is drawing near and try in every way to look younger," he wrote on Facebook.

Nemtsov, however, vowed to continue, arguing that the "Putin clan" won't disappear after three protests.

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