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Kremlin May Get Last Laugh After the Vote

By Richard Lourie

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In two weeks, the presidential election will be over, and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin will most likely squeak out a majority in the first round.

If there's any vote-rigging, it will be done to ensure a first-round victory for Putin because the need to hold a second round would further reduce his clout and charisma.

One strategy for the opposition is to determine, based on the recent parliamentary elections and other data, where vote-rigging is most likely to occur and make special efforts to document it there. The possibility of such intense scrutiny could itself reduce vote-tampering in some places.

In the upcoming two weeks, the U.S. Embassy must avoid any situation that could be construed as an attempt to influence Russia's internal affairs. It is true that Putin & Co. are cynically exploiting a nonexistent U.S. threat to rally political support, but there's a little more

to it than that.

The Russian 2012 presidential election comes on the heels of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Soviet Union, an event that left a profound and unnerving trace on Putin and those of his generation. If something so immense and mighty as the Soviet Union could sink so easily, how durable can today's rickety petro-state be?

And, of course, the frightening images of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in the dock and a bloodied, pummeled Moammar Gadhafi in Libya don't sweeten the dreams of authoritarian leaders either.

Dreams aside, Putin doesn't seem in touch with reality — the new reality of Russian society. On the basis of the mass street protests in December and February, the leader of the Islamist rebels in North Caucasus, Doku Umarov, has recently declared that Russian civilians are no longer legitimate targets for attack (although military, police and security officers still are).

Putin might dismiss the protesters as spoiled urbanites who don't represent the "real Russia," but he would be missing a vital signal if he did not see that even his mortal enemy had recognized the game-changing significance of the demonstrations.

Unfortunately, Putin may view Umarov's gesture as a sign of the Islamists' weakness or as a cause of lumping the opposition with the Islamists as enemies.

Putin will be inaugurated in early May, taking the oath of office in the Kremlin followed by an artillery salute of 30 rounds. If there's been significant vote-rigging, proven or suspected, the inauguration could also reverberate with nationwide demonstrations. The opposition should use calls for Putin's resignation or a recount less as attainable goals than as part of a six-year strategy to extract maximum concessions from the Kremlin. Greater independence in the media and judiciary must be a constant goal.

Just as important is to use those years to build a true united opposition party with a genuine workable program and real appeal to the masses. Six years from now, opposition leader Alexei Navalny, currently that party's most likely candidate, will only be 41, still young for a president.

Putin himself could still rise to the occasion and use his new term to cooperate with the opposition and build the civil society Russia has never had. For a while, he was making some sounds and moves that might indicate he's become more sensitive to the variety of opinion in Russia. Yet lately, the attacks on the media have led some to worry that after the election the Kremlin will take its vengeance.

In that light, Moscow's support for Syria's President Bashar Assad can also be read as a signal sent for domestic consumption, a warning shot across the opposition's bow.

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