The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Opposition Needs to Appeal to the 'Real Russia'

By Daniel Treisman

May 04, 2012



The real conundrum for liberal opponents of President Vladimir Putin is not so much how to revive and prolong the now faltering wave of urban protests that broke out this winter. The demonstrations have made their point. The members of the angry middle class can be counted on to reoccupy the streets as new acts of official arrogance reignite their outrage. Putin's inauguration on Monday should prompt some fireworks.

But the real challenge for the opposition is how to put together a coalition that could beat Putin or his stand-in in a free and fair election.

Amid the excitement surrounding the sudden awakening of the middle class, this point has been largely lost. But the political arithmetic is inescapable.

Western-style democrats and economic liberals cannot win by themselves. In 19 years of post-Soviet parliamentary elections, some of which were free and fair, liberal parties such

as the Union of Right Forces have received only modest results.

The iPhone-toting, LiveJournal-blogging sophisticates from Moscow, St. Petersburg and other large cities are a new political phenomenon whose importance is bound to grow. But they do not constitute at present more than 15 percent of the Russian population.

To win the presidency in some future ballot, the liberal opposition will need to join forces with the Russia heartland — that is, the provinces, where basic, bread-and-butter economic issues are the driving factor in political affiliation.

Both former President Boris Yeltsin and Putin during his first two presidential terms managed to combine a respect for markets and modernity with a feel for provincial sensibilities. Yeltsin turned balancing between the two into an art form, with his rhetoric of freedom and his Santa Claus jaunts to the regions, doling out cash and promises.

In the much easier setting of an economic boom, Putin also paired macroeconomic orthodoxy with fiscal courtship of the hinterland. The $160 billion worth of pre-election promises he made last winter recall the frenetic generosity of Yeltsin's 1996 campaign.

And any future president from the liberal opposition will need to do the same. For at least the next five to 10 years, large territories and social groups will depend on financial assistance from the state.

Inequality is built into Russia's economic geography. Eight of the country's 83 federal subjects produce more than half of the country's gross domestic product. Forty-one of the subjects received more in federal transfers in 2010 than the total of all profits minus losses earned by local enterprises.

If you add the 32 million Russians who are pensioners, it is obvious why Russians have such a desire for a welfare state. In most polls on the subject, Russians consistently place high values on the right to free education, health care and support for the elderly and sick.

If it wants to end up more than a fringe party, the liberal opposition will need to reckon with this reality. A rhetoric of fiscal austerity and equal opportunity does not resonate with those who see little opportunity in their depressed and desolate cities, towns and villages.

In forging a coalition similar to Yeltsin's during the 1990s, the liberal opposition faces two hurdles. First, most Russians associate it with the images of a cut-throat, crony capitalism and a pampered elite.

Second, the social agenda of the professional urbanites, a core contingent of the liberal opposition, does not always click with the more traditional ethos of the provinces. That is why the authorities pounced with such harsh enthusiasm on the Pussy Riot girls. It also explains the endless efforts to combat a largely mythical gay rights movement. The Kremlin would like nothing better than to portray the opposition as a cabal of degenerate feminist punks, church desecrators and proselytizing homosexuals.

How can a liberal movement overcome these obstacles and win the trust of disgruntled steel workers in Cherepovets or coal miners in the Kemerovo region? The easiest way would be to find a leader who can speak the language of the provinces and can personally convince

Russians in depressed regions that he or she will not abandon them.

The opposition needs to move on from simply berating Putin to developing a real program to develop and modernize the country. While attacking current state leaders, it is not enough just to propose cutting the state budget. For example, the opposition needs to create a health system in which the elderly do not have to bribe their ambulance drivers and an education system in which the young cannot slip money to their college admissions officers and professors to gain admittance and graduate with honors.

In speeches, opposition leaders might talk less about freedom — important as it is — and more about fairness and solidarity. Instead of concentrating on a few big cities, they might focus their campaign on the hundreds of grassroots cases of community activism in which ordinary people band together to fight forest fires, protest a corrupt police chief or block an environmentally harmful development project. A leader who makes ordinary Russians feel hopeful, proud and united will win against the cynically divisive strategies of the incumbents.

All this might appear premature, however. At this point, defeating Putin still seems more urgent than replacing him. But history shows that when regimes with weak institutions collapse, the end can come suddenly. Less than two years before street protests ousted Indonesian President Suharto, analysts saw him as more entrenched than ever.

And when Putin falls, the winner in a presidential election will be the leader who can appeal to a broad coalition. The time to build that coalition is now.

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