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Putin Uses Judo to Keep the Opposition Down

By Georgy Bovt

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As Vladimir Putin began his new term as president, he clearly demonstrated that he values continuity and stability above all else — at least, according to how he understands these concepts. That is why everything that happened in the days prior to and following his inauguration was largely predictable.

It was no surprise that when Putin presented the State Duma with Dmitry Medvedev as his candidate for prime minister, he told them that there were no intrigues involved — or, as he put it, "no political games." After all, on Sept. 24, during the United Russia congress, Putin said straight-out that he wanted to switch places with Medvedev after the March presidential election. And now everything is going strictly according to plans — even if he is the only one who knows these plans.

In all likelihood, Putin envisions a very predictable fate for the so-called nonsystemic opposition in the coming years of his rule. After tens of thousands protested election fraud

during the Duma elections in December and February, Putin and his inner circle developed a very deliberate policy for dealing with all of those people.

That approach can be compared to one of the principles in Putin's favorite sport — judo. Many judo moves are modeled after the cherry tree branch, or sakura, found in Japan and other Asian countries that first bends under the mounting weight of falling snow, and then forcefully snaps back into position. In this way, the sakura move is designed to use the enemy's force against him.

Putin purposefully let the opposition expend all of its energy on the streets. Then, as many had expected, the opposition stumbled over the following six months as members proved unable to agree on any unified action, leadership, a political program or tactics for pursuing their goals. The authorities then delivered the coup de grace in the form of a decoy — laws promising direct gubernatorial elections and greater freedoms for political parties to register. But those laws have been watered down to nothing with the aid of additional legislation and backroom political maneuvering. Thus, Medvedev's "reforms" will have little, if any, effect on the political landscape during Putin's term in office.

It was clear from the start that the authorities would permit demonstrators to play their little game only as long as the number of those who turned out for rallies was small enough for the riot police to be able to disperse — and with force, if necessary. Once the numbers get too large — in the range of 300,000 to 500,000 — it becomes much more difficult to disperse the crowds. If they remain at 100,000 or fewer, it is easier for OMON riot police to "hit them over the head with truncheons," as Putin said in 2010.

At the same time, Putin had to show everyone that his strong leadership style would differ from Medvedev's liberal approach. He had to make it known that he is a tough guy who does not joke around. That is why Moscow riot police used force against the scattered street protests held on the eve of his inauguration and during the following days. What's more, the streets along Putin's motorcade route were completely cleared of cars and pedestrians, sending an unequivocal signal regarding the authoritarian style of his rule.

Of course, Putin is capable of ordering much harsher measures than mass arrests, detentions and OMON truncheons beating the heads of protesters. But I would not rush to conclude that his regime will tighten the screws and carry out a systemic crackdown on the opposition. This is not because Putin does not have such a plan prepared or because he is opposed to harsh measures in principle. It is simply because Putin knows perfectly well that the system of government he has built over the past 12 years is incapable of carrying out any policy consistently or effectively. It is too corrupt and heavily influenced by powerful interest groups and constantly requires his personal intervention to resolve even minor problems. A truly effective and harsh authoritarian system cannot function that way.

More likely, the authorities will pinpoint specific repressive measures against the opposition. Those measures will be directed against major independent media outlets and the most disloyal opposition leaders, such as Sergei Udaltsov, Boris Nemtsov or Alexei Navalny. Each opposition leader will be dealt with individually, in whatever manner, time and place the authorities deem best.

As he begins his third presidential term, Putin is content with the course he has taken since he

came to power in 2000 and sees no need for radical reforms or corrections to it. In Putin's view, even if that course is not ideal, it is the only one possible for a large, unwieldy and disorganized country like Russia.

As he sees it, Russia will not develop according to Western models and scenarios, and neither the country nor the people have matured sufficiently for the forms of democracy that Western countries long ago adopted.

Apparently, only Putin knows the one path that Russia must take to avoid disaster and collapse. That is why he will attempt to serve out his third term in exactly the same manner he ruled during the previous 12 years — personally deciding what will be better or worse for the country as he goes.

Thus, the huge, rusty and listing ship called Russia lacks the safety mechanisms, life boats and most important, a designated substitute if something should happen to the captain.

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