

Putin Is Paying Attention To Opposition Council

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Despite public sneering and disparaging comments, the Kremlin is taking the recent election of the opposition's Coordinating Council seriously. It sees it for what it is potentially worth: an independent structure of political authority with legitimacy among the many active Russian voters.

Of particular concern is the prospect for the council to become a coalescing pole for all those who are disenchanted with President Vladimir Putin's rule.

Until this election, anti-Putin forces lacked an "assembly point" and an organizational capacity to coordinate their messages and action. The Coordination Council solves this structural problem, although its effectiveness remains to be proven. There is now a body of elected public figures who have the legitimacy to speak and act on behalf of Putin's opponents.

The one thing that Kremlin planners are seeking to block at all costs is for parts of the business and political elite to join forces with the Coordination Council. Were that to happen, a credible alternative to the regime could emerge with fissures across Russia's political system. The lack of a genuine alternative has allowed United Russia to maintain its tight grip on power in the latest round of regional elections, marked by heavy manipulation.

There is fear that the coalescing of the protest movement and parts of the governing elites could be facilitated by the emergence of a new party led by liberals and civic leaders who now dominate the council. The council's leaders are still wary of building a real party, fearing it might turn people off. But it is a tool to remain in legal politics while that avenue is still open.

To neutralize this threat, the Kremlin rushed the relaunch of billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov's decoy party, Civic Platform, with massive media coverage of its inaugural congress.

The plan is to orchestrate a riveting political drama by pitting Prokhorov's liberal party against Dmitry Rogozin's nationalist and ultraconservative Rodina as a prequel to their face-off in the presidential race of 2018, if Putin decides to step down.

The Kremlin's strategy is multifaceted: smear the protest leaders with propaganda, sow discord among them, isolate them from the political system by filing criminal charges, deny them independent fundraising and inundate the scene with political fakes. At the same time, however, the Kremlin is wary of ratcheting up repression and merging on the toll-free, no-exit freeway to a Belarus-style dictatorship.

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