The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin's Political Volcano

By Nikolai Petrov

November 07, 2012



The Kremlin had hoped that after the March presidential election gave President Vladimir Putin a decisive victory, the protest movement would die down, the regime would gain political legitimacy for another six years, and Putin would have a free hand to continue with business as usual. But that didn't happen.

Then, the authorities hoped that the October regional elections would prove that the ruling party had adapted to the new political landscape and that the government's repressive measures against protest figures would scare their supporters into hiding or staying home. But that didn't happen either.

To make matters worse, the leaders' ratings are continuing to fall.

If the authorities want to gain a free hand in implementing their social and economic measures, they must first extricate themselves from the current political crisis. But their tactic of intimidating protesters has been ineffective. On the contrary, it risks escalating the confrontation between the authorities and this active segment of society. It is like trying

to compress a powerful volcano. While the political volcano may be only blowing smoke for the time being, the authorities will not be able to control the damage if it explodes.

With each passing day, Putin is increasingly forced to wage a battle on two fronts: against the ruling elites, who increasingly view him as a liability to their own legitimacy and hopes of political survival, and against citizens whose confidence in him has dropped.

If Putin controlled at least one of the two groups, he could start his social and economic maneuvering. But that would be too risky under the current conditions. Were Putin to take a serious step in any direction, it would only help consolidate the fragmented resistance among the political elite. Given the weakness of Russia's institutions and Putin's waning popularity, such a move would risk destabilizing the system.

Putin's only remaining instrument for restoring his popularity is to wage a serious anti--corruption campaign. Perhaps his first significant move in this direction was the decision to crack down on Oboronservis and fire Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov on Tuesday.

At this point, the growing list of repressive steps taken against the most active segment of society more closely resembles a series of impulsive reactionary measures than part of a coherent strategy. Nonetheless, their combined effect is to create a single negative trend even in the absence of a strategy. In addition, by forming a conservative majority to resolve the problem of legitimacy, the authorities close the path to development.

A continuation of this gradual downward slide is an even worse scenario than if Putin were to make the system more authoritarian because that would at least accelerate the crisis and ultimately force a resolution. Fortunately, Putin has only enough resources to continue this slide for two more years, but not for another five or more.

The current problems will only grow worse, while the resources needed to dampen the effects of implementing painful reforms will be exhausted. Unfortunately, it looks as though this is the path Putin will take. Knowing that he can't hang on until the end of his term, he will delay his departure in the hope that conditions will improve enough later for him to make a safe escape.

Nikolai Petrov is a scholar in residence at the Carnegie Moscow Center.

Related articles:

- Now, Almost Anyone Is a Traitor
- What Serdyukov and Sobchak Have in Common
- Before Putin, a String of Unhealthy Russian Leaders

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/11/07/putins-political-volcano-a19199