

Putin Could Lose Big If He Dissolves Duma

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Could President Vladimir Putin benefit politically by disbanding the State Duma and calling an early parliamentary election?

A recent report by Governance and Problem Analysis Center, a conservative think tank co-chaired by Putin ally and Russian Railways president Vladimir Yakunin, hints as much. It says the 2011 Duma election results were falsified with the Communist Party finishing first with 30 percent, while United Russia came in second with a paltry 21 percent.

But the upside for Putin of getting rid of this Duma may seem substantial. It would defang the opposition's key demand of new and fair elections. It would remove the discredited group of deputies whose glaring hypocrisy and undeclared foreign luxury real estate holdings infuriate the public and undermine Putin's authority.

In addition, disbanding the Duma would take full advantage of the new election rules

according to which half the Duma will be elected in single-mandate districts, a move that will help secure an overwhelming pro-Putin majority in the Duma.

It would also undermine United Russia as a possible political base for Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and his team of "United Russia liberals." It would also embellish Putin as a crusader against crooks and thieves. Finally, it could remold Russia's political elite in Putin's image by drafting Popular Front nationalists with no compromising exposure to the West.

But risks of dissolving the Duma are huge. First, this would delegitimize the entire power structure, including Putin himself, since it would mean his 2012 election would have been held under an ostensibly illegitimate political regime.

Second, a new Duma election may create a rallying point for the anti-Putin forces within the disgruntled elites to field a viable opposition ticket to shatter Putin's dominance.

Third, sacrificing United Russia for the Popular Front could be devastating to Putin's entire system. United Russia is an essential element in Putin's vertical-power structure. Humiliating the United Russia elite would exponentially increase the number of people holding a grudge against Putin.

The Popular Front is a motley collection of sycophantic opportunists and anti-Western fanatics. As such, it would be impossible to transform the front into an effective party of power. More ominously, it might signal the transition to a personalistic totalitarian regime. This could backfire against Putin because he himself could be expendable if the elite do not consider him to be brutal enough.

It's a dicey bet.

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