

Why Putin Should Dissolve the Duma

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The latest fashion for Russian officials is to cite political roots stretching as far back as possible. For example, a portrait gallery of governors dating to the reign of Catherine the Great greets visitors to regional administration buildings, and portraits of prominent politicians from the time of Tsar Alexander I hang in the Federation Council hall. But officials with a penchant for placing their own pictures alongside those of their noble predecessors seem oblivious to how it reflects poorly on them.

Something like this is now happening with the State Duma. The current Duma was elected in December 2011 for a term of five years. But it is unlikely to serve out that term before early elections are called.

The Constitution stipulates that the Duma cannot be dissolved during its first year of work, and that period has now elapsed. A number of signs support the much-discussed notion that early elections will be called. First, the current Duma was elected amid scandals and massive protests. Second, the Duma spent the year rubber-stamping a rapid succession of controversial Kremlin initiatives, damaging its reputation in the eyes of voters. Third,

ongoing "public floggings" and purges of Duma members have further discredited the lower chamber. Fourth, the Kremlin has understood that United Russia is unable to throw off its reputation as "the party of crooks and thieves" and is placing its bets on the All-Russia People's Front as its new political foundation. Finally, the Kremlin continues its populist policies as if elections were just around the corner and not four years away.

The Kremlin has itself been ousting Duma deputies. In late February alone, it directly or indirectly pushed out three United Russia deputies: Vladimir Pekhtin, Alexei Lomakin and Vasily Tolstopyatov. Another United Russia deputy, Alexei Knyshov, resigned amid a scandal in October, and Irina Yarovaya, who was caught with an undeclared luxury Moscow apartment, may be next. There is also a new series of scandals over plagiarism discovered in dissertations written by Duma deputies.

It would be advantageous for the Kremlin to hold early Duma elections this year for the following three reasons:

1. A new Duma would serve a five-year term from 2013 until 2018, ending in a year that coincides with the next presidential election. This would avoid interrupting the political cycle and allow the Kremlin to consolidate its political forces.
2. Relatively favorable economic conditions and a lull in the protest movement auger well for the authorities if elections were to be held this year.
3. A Just Russia, the Communist Party and especially the Liberal Democratic Party no longer fool anyone as "opposition parties." Most Russians understand that they are nothing more than ersatz, Kremlin-friendly parties. It is time for the Kremlin to abandon this pseudo-opposition project in the Duma and come up with something new.

The Kremlin surely has a contingency plan for early Duma elections, but that doesn't mean that it will be implemented. One thing is certain, however: A new Duma, whenever it does come into being, can only be an improvement over the present one. The Kremlin might use its administrative resources in a new Duma election to make sure that pro-Kremlin candidates from the All-Russia People's Front win in the overwhelming majority of single-mandate districts. But this would be possible only if the federal and regional elite reach a compromise with deputies that are much more politically powerful than the current ones

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