

Leading the Opposition With the People's Front

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In an early March interview with Moskovsky Komsomolets, the Kremlin's spin doctor Dmitry Badovsky argued that it is now more important to raise a viable opposition, unquestionably loyal to the Russian state, than to ensure the continued political dominance of the party of power.

This sheds light on the Kremlin's central dilemma: how to perpetuate Putin's system and infuse it with popular legitimacy while avoiding any unscripted rotation of power.

It reflects a long-standing belief that Putin's system needs to reinvent itself through tightly managed elections in which parts of Putin's elite compete for power while crowding out all challengers to the system. Vladislav Surkov said in 2006 that the Kremlin needed a "second leg to lean on in case the first one falls asleep." It never worked out. Understandably, Putin's elite flocked to the "alpha dog" party of power — United Russia, leaving the "beta dog," A Just Russia, in oppositionist obscurity.

Now, the concept has been adapted to today's turbulent times. The legitimacy of Putin's system requires an opposition that would be broadly perceived as genuine but would never challenge Putin as the supreme ruler.

The existing loyal opposition is pathetic. Of the three State Duma parties, only the Communists have a future, but they are still harmless to the regime. The Liberal Democratic Party is an expiring, old man's act, while Just Russia, having betrayed its protest voters, may not make it through the next election.

Then there is Mikhail Prokhorov's Civil Platform, an ideology-free legal vehicle for registering candidates in elections, led by a controllable billionaire with foggy political views. In the regions, it may replace Just Russia as an assembly point for disgruntled regional elites. In Moscow, it would replay Prokhorov's presidential campaign and divide the protest vote.

In 2007, President Vladimir Putin was asked what he would do when his second presidential term expired. "I will lead the opposition," Putin said mockingly. Today, he is doing exactly that with the People's Front. He leads a populist revolt against Medvedev's liberal agenda, the wealthy, "crooks and thieves," capitalism, the West and democratic freedoms. He breeds the new, "nationalized" elite loyal personally to him.

It's the essence of Putin's rule. He wants to lead everything, including the opposition, to maintain his unchallenged primacy. The task is superhuman.

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