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# Putin, Not Bolotnaya, Is His Own Worst Threat

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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As I walked through the crowd gathered on Bolotnaya Ploshchad for this month's anniversary of the May 6, 2012, rally, I experienced a sudden sense of déjà vu. I didn't feel like I was back at last year's demonstration but rather at a modern-day Communist rally.

True, the Bolotnaya protesters were a bit younger and better educated on the whole. But

otherwise, the hate directed at the ruling regime and the other similarities are growing stronger with each successive rally. In fact, the flagging energies and enthusiasm of Communist marches offer the Bolotnaya activists a picture of what their own future might look like.

Many well-meaning people who gathered on Bolotnaya Ploshchad this month can be certain that they are promoting a better alternative to President Vladimir Putin. But they have no idea how to end his regime or even why it is bad for the country. In dreaming of Putin's exit, they fail to notice that their goal was largely accomplished last year when Putin left the Cabinet to assume the more ceremonial post of president. When Putin first left the presidency, he shifted all of the authority to the office of prime minister, possibly hoping that four years later he would be able to pull the same stunt in reverse. But handing over power is much simpler than getting it back.

The real power that was transferred from the presidency remains with the Cabinet. Putin can complain that his orders are going unfulfilled all he wants, but he still will not be able to influence the Cabinet's course.

The opposition can imagine that a conflict within the ruling elite will bring the government down. But even if that should happen, that does not mean Putin would take over. More likely, somebody like former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin would seize the reins as prime minister.

The political regime has turned into a chaotic agglomeration of institutions and agencies that share no common purpose, political course or even rules. Their only distinguishing features are conflict and infighting — things that the Bolotnaya protesters have failed to recognize at their rallies. Former Deputy Prime Minister Vladislav Surkov's resignation immediately after the May 6 rally was a perfect illustration of how protesters have lost touch with reality. If there was anyone in the country whom they hated as much as Putin, it was Surkov, the architect of the current political system and of United Russia. However, it was not the opposition that achieved his resignation. None of the protesters had even demanded his ouster. Surkov quit because he saw that he had lost control of the political machine and was becoming a victim of the government infighting.

The ruling elite has little to fear from the opposition, but that does not mean it has a rosy future ahead. To the contrary, its future looks bleak. Political turmoil is increasing as the government begins to implode. The problem with the opposition is not that Russians are happy with the authorities — they aren't — but that the protesters have failed to give voice to the public's real frustration.

Meanwhile, spontaneous grassroots protests have broken out. Striking workers in Kaluga and protesting doctors in Izhevsk are fighting their own battles without any links to the events on Bolotnaya Ploshchad. The grassroots demands focus on specific injustices in education, health care and social welfare.

Even without eloquent slogans or flashy banners, these outbursts of angry indignation, when added to the schisms forming among the ruling clans, could have more radical consequences for Russia than all of the rallies in Moscow combined. It is out there on the streets far beyond the Moscow Ring Road that the real protest energy is building. Once unleashed, it alone is powerful enough to deliver a devastating blow to Putin.

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