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Kremlin Is Afraid of the Masses, Not Navalny

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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The authorities made a serious tactical error when a Kirov court handed down a guilty verdict against opposition leader Alexei Navalny last Thursday. But even more disastrous than the mistake itself is the fact that Russian officials never admit when they are wrong. This forms the basis of the whole irrational culture of subordination that makes it impossible to challenge even the most idiotic decision because each one is considered to be irreversible

a priori. In fact, it is difficult to say which action caused more collateral damage to the authorities: the groundless verdict or Navalny's hasty release one day later to allow him to take part in the Moscow mayoral election.

These events clearly show that the country's leaders are unable to assess the consequences of their actions. They are less afraid of Navalny or the opposition movement than they are of the threats posed by a prolonged, systemic economic slump and the resulting social discontent.

Vladimir Putin won the 2012 presidential elections with such a convincing victory that even the opposition did not challenge the results. Why did people vote for Putin? The authorities told Russians everywhere that a victory for the liberal opposition would put what was left of the social welfare state at risk, that health care and education would be privatized and commercialized, that mass layoffs, factory closings and higher utilities fees would result, and that the millions who are dependent on state salaries would be left empty-handed. The majority of Russian voters opted for a known, if not entirely pleasant commodity in Putin rather than risk giving authority to the unpredictable opposition whom they distrust.

But after the election, leaders adopted exactly the same program with which they had so successfully frightened voters. They had a logical reason for doing so. It is necessary to consolidate the electorate after a win. Taking a lesson from the events of 2012, the ruling elite were ready to make concessions to other groups of elites that supported the opposition either directly or indirectly. Making concessions to a defeated opponent is not only gracious, but effective.

Consolidating society as a whole is always worthwhile, but one question naturally arises: At whose expense is this consolidation occurring? In this case, the consolidation of the elite came at the expense not only of all the rest of society, including provincial businesses, but also at the expense of common sense. The struggle between supporters of liberal, free-market policy and conservative pro-government policy ended in a type of synthesis. The liberals showed disregard for the social rights of the people, the commercialization of medicine and education, widespread privatization and contempt for the interests of the lower classes. The conservatives led a pseudo-patriotic campaign against government abuse, while catering to religious obscurantism and prohibiting everything they could get their hands on.

This was manifested most clearly in the attack by the Education and Science Ministry against the Russian Academy of Sciences. Every bureaucratic trick and authoritarian technique was employed to push through reforms developed by liberal ideologues, some of whom were openly linked to the opposition.

Unfortunately for the government, members of the liberal opposition are unwilling to share responsibility for the consequences of current policy, despite the fact that many of the unpopular measures are part of their own ideology. If the liberals in government hope to change that picture, they will first have to stop arresting and jailing liberal opposition members.

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