

# Putin Finally Talks With the Opposition

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The recent meeting of the Valdai Club was the first time President Vladimir Putin met and spoke directly with members of the "nonsystemic opposition," that is, the political forces that have been denied the chance of participating in the country's political life throughout Putin's time in power. Among the international gathering of 200 politicians and pundits were four public figures who had taken part in the mass protests on Bolotnaya Ploshchad and Prospekt Akademika Sakharova: Gennady Gudkov, Ksenia Sobchak, Ilya Ponomaryov and yours truly. Opposition leader Alexei Navalny was also invited, but he was unable to attend because of travel restrictions placed on him by the Kirov court that allowed him to go free pending his appeal on embezzlement charges.

This year's Valdai conference was unlike any other. Putin went out of his way to give opposition

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questions.

The situation was different under Dmitry Medvedev when he was president. Immediately after the street protests in December 2011, Medvedev initiated political reforms, and in early 2012 he held a lengthy meeting with the opposition at his residence in Gorki-9. The meeting focused on the specifics of the political reforms demanded by protesters and a Kremlin working group began hammering them out in cooperation with the nonsystemic opposition.

The result was the unrestricted registration of political parties, now numbering 72 in Russia, the direct election of governors (albeit with filters) and changes to the next election of the State Duma: a 5 percent barrier for parties and the return of single-mandate districts.

At the time, former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin several times raised the possibility of opposition leaders, dubbed "Decembrists 2.0," meeting with then-Prime Minister Putin to discuss the protesters' demands. But Putin refused.

Once he returned to the Kremlin, Putin decided to crack down on the opposition. He pushed through a host of repressive laws and had criminal charges pressed against 27 of the Bolotnaya Ploshchad protesters for causing a "mass riot," when, in fact, nothing of the sort ever occurred. Many of them have spent more than a year in detention and trials against 12 are now underway in the Moscow City Court.

However, the unexpected degree of voter support that opposition leader Alexei Navalny managed to garner after a very short mayoral campaign and the continuing street demonstrations have shown Putin that the protest movement is alive, well and growing in strength. By taking a tougher line, the authorities are only exacerbating the problems and rallying the opposition. Kremlin-approved opposition parties are losing support, and in the recent regional elections United Russia's share of the electorate sunk to a near-record low — matched only by its previous low in December 2011 — and even the votes it reported this time were thanks to new instances of electoral fraud.

The deadlock is only worsening. At Valdai, Putin reiterated his extremely conservative program that reflected the spirit of late 19th- and early 20th -century authoritarianism, never once mentioning the value of freedom, human rights or the Constitution. Again, he justified his actions with the statement that most Russians support him.

At the same time, he voiced support for "saving the people" and declared that the state places the highest value on each individual citizen. But those humanitarian pronouncements do not jibe with his policy of suppressing dissenters and a variety of minorities, as well as the law banning U.S. citizens from adopting Russian orphans. Putin called for a broad public dialogue, even while comparing young Russians who took part in street protests in Moscow to the Chinese Red Guards.

Putin's dialogue with the "Decembrists" at Valdai was carefully orchestrated. The opposition members themselves were dispersed throughout the large and crowded room and the dialogue was conducted in a strict question and answer format that left no opportunity

for rebuttal or follow-up questions. Putin went out of his way to give opposition members a chance to ask questions. What's more, the meeting was broadcast live across the whole country, and it was clear that the whole conversation had been planned.

We posed two main questions regarding the guarantees of freedom and the continuation of political reforms. The guarantee of freedom includes demanding the release of everyone detained in connection with the May 2012 Bolotnaya Ploshchad rally, halting the criminal repression of the opposition, ending the repressive policies of the government and upholding the broad freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution.

Hopefully, political reforms will continue, and the authorities will stop the widespread electoral fraud, eliminate the municipal filters to direct gubernatorial elections and provide freedom of speech in the national media. Two of the main demands made by protestors at Bolotnaya Ploshchad and Prospekt Akademika Sakharova were for an end to political repression and for fair elections. At Valdai, Putin gave his first direct response to those demands — and he did so on live television.

When I was given an opportunity to speak, I said there were millions of Russians who demanded freedom and fair elections and who could no longer tolerate a policy of repression and fraud. A continuation of these policies would only lead to one thing — increased tension and confrontation in society, as well as the further weakening of the government and an erosion of its legitimacy. I suggested that the authorities grant amnesty to the participants in the Bolotnaya Ploshchad rally and continue systemic political reforms by removing barriers to free and fair elections.

Putin's open-ended answer left him with enough maneuvering room to pursue any course he chooses, but at least he acknowledged the existence of the problem and agreed that we should continue the discussion.

It is in the vital interests of the country that these two issues be resolved as soon as possible, and the coming days will show which path Putin will take.

One more thing is clear: Without pressure from society and public opinion, without large-scale peaceful protests and without the opposition actively participating in elections, the authorities would never change anything. That is the main lesson of the last two years.

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