The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Post-Putin Uncertainty Means a Jittery Russian Elite and Brittle Regime

Amid the uncertainty over what will happen when Putin steps down in 2024, everyone is striving to claim a spot in the sun.

By Tatiana Stanovaya

November 04, 2019



Kremlin.ru

In some ways, it seems strange to talk of a political crisis: the Moscow protests have been stamped out and amounted to nothing, pro-regime candidates won in nearly all the regional elections, and political life in Russia appears to be returning to normal.

This lull, however, is deceptive. Outwardly, the regime still looks stable and robust, but on the inside, smoldering crises are building up. What's happening now bears no resemblance to the crisis of 2011–2012, though both periods have in common an unexpected wave of protests, a fall in approval ratings, and harsh prison sentences for individual protesters. But the Russian authorities function differently now compared to how they did in 2012, meaning that similar

events have very different consequences.

The main difference between the recent protests and those of 2011–2012 is in the authorities' logic. In December 2011, it was evident from the Kremlin's initial reaction to the protests that the leadership understood the need to make concessions. The presidential administration drew up a reform package almost straight away that included the return of gubernatorial elections and steps to relax the legislation on political parties.

Back then, the Kremlin made use of the services of intermediary arbitrators tasked with building a dialogue between the authorities and angry Muscovites. Former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin took to the stage of a protest on Prospekt Sakharova, while the billionaire businessman Mikhail Prokhorov ran in the 2012 presidential election. The authorities understood that there were grievances in society, and that something had to be done about them.

The subsequent repressions and wave of conservatism only ensued after the presidential election, following a clear drop in protest activity. The authorities' approval ratings recovered, and within the Kremlin, it was decided that the winter protests were a one-off flare-up. The Bolotnaya case, in which dozens of people were jailed following an unruly protest on Moscow's Bolotnaya Square in May 2012, emerged out of the remnants of the protest movement, and was likely the result of the authorities' desire to affirm their victory in the standoff of recent months.

Related article: Putin's Declassified KGB Record Shows He Was No High-Flier, but a Solid B

The situation today is very different. For the authorities, this summer's protests were not so much a domestic issue as an external event, in keeping with the prevailing geopolitical logic. The Kremlin doesn't recognize the Moscow protests as a self-contained political problem, but sees them as part of the external battle being waged against Russia, in which everything is done to stymie the geopolitical ambition of the Russian state. Under this logic, the activity of the real opposition (as opposed to the in-system opposition parties) is just another obstacle to the successful advancement of President Vladimir Putin's agenda, which is positioned as the only legitimate agenda for the state and society.

This explains the entirely different thinking behind the behavior of the political establishment, which understands perfectly that for career success, it's best not to rock the boat with initiatives that don't fit in with the reference points given by the president. The authorities are increasingly focused on attending to the priorities of the head of state (priorities that are often inferred rather than named), for the sake of which they forfeit any sensitivity to social and domestic political processes.

Under this logic, there is no confrontation between the authorities and liberals, and as far as the authorities are concerned, there is nothing to discuss, which means no compromises can be made. The release of the imprisoned journalist Ivan Golunov following a huge public outcry, and the latest adjustments to sentences for protesters are not gestures made to placate an incensed public, but simply the regime correcting itself, learning to juggle police batons more carefully, and thinking through repressive measures more carefully before enacting them. It is essentially a reaction to the local excesses of the security services, who, having met

no resistance inside the system, have really run wild.

One of the main reasons for the current encroachment of the siloviki is the internal shakeup of 2016, when domestic policy masters were replaced with mere administrators whose task is to serve, not to build. This left the siloviki as the only players left in domestic policy.

If back in the winter of 2011–2012, the idea of moderate liberalization was at least rhetorically acceptable to the authorities, now, liberalism is de facto anathema. Liberal ideas are not just unfashionable, they are perceived as hostile. Liberalism has definitively become the ideology of Russia's geopolitical enemies.

Related article: What's Next for Russia's Economy?

This has led to another key difference in today's situation: there is no place now for mediation by moderate liberals. The authorities see no grounds for talks, since the source of the destabilization has been declared to be external forces, with the help of internal agents. The in-system liberals, pushed out to the periphery and deprived of even the informal right to a political voice, have given way to technocrats who are doomed to play the role of the only counterbalance to the siloviki.

The recent reshuffle in the Human Rights Council is further evidence of this: the regime barely even needs any democratic trimmings anymore. The council is losing its function as an interface for dialogue between the authorities and progressive circles of society.

This process of eradicating liberalism is leading to other consequences too. Unlike in 2011–2012, when the elite began to divide into those who had a certain degree of sympathy for the protest movement, and conservatives who had none, what we are seeing right now is the powerful consolidation of political power. Everything is mobilizing to fight against outside interference.

If seven years ago, the main question for those inside the system was how not to get caught between the protests and the Kremlin, now everyone is competing for the role of the top defender of the regime's stability. Liberal rhetoric, meanwhile, is becoming the preserve of the non-system opposition.

The third and final key difference in the current situation is the impending transition of power. In 2012, the newly returned conservative elite was unpacking its suitcases after four unpleasant years of Dmitry Medvedev and his presidency marked by flirting with liberalism. Now the ruling class is sitting on its suitcases with no idea what its medium-term prospects may be.

Amid the uncertainty, everyone is seeking to invest in the future distribution of power prerogatives now, by broadening as far as possible their contribution to the functioning of the system. The bigger a player's share portfolio, the more rights they will receive in the process of deciding the corporation's fate.

This is what is behind the overheated political services market: everyone is striving to claim

exclusive functions for themselves that could later be required by Putin during the implementation of his plan for 2024, when he is obliged by the constitution to step down. The Moscow protests have created new opportunities for those who seek to be at the top of the wave during the period in which the regime's fate will be decided.

The uncertainty is making the elites nervous. And unlike in 2012, when everything was returning to a familiar path, right now, the jitters are only going to grow, which will exacerbate fears of any unpredictable events. People can talk as much as they like about external interference, and even believe it, but the main reason for the authorities' harsh reaction to the protests was that they couldn't understand what they were really dealing with. And how could they, when no one knows what tomorrow will bring?

The stakes are far higher, and the circle of shareholders remains narrow, which means any external attempts to influence events will be firmly rebuffed — above all, liberal protest.

All this is leading to the state's growing isolation from society, and, consequently, to the authorities' unwillingness to rule using methods other than force. The current construction of the regime looks as solid and sturdy as ever, but this solidity translates into a lack of flexibility and resistance to change, which is itself becoming a structural risk to the future of the system.

This article was first published *by the Carnegie Russia Center*

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/11/04/post-putin-uncertainty-means-jittery-russian-elite-brittle-regime-a68028