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Russia

The 2016 Russian Elections: Putrefaction as the Laboratory of Life

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Today, it would seem that the upcoming September elections to the State Duma are a cause of growing concern only in the Kremlin. While polls continue to record a low level of public interest in the event, and the tiny number of parties allowed to run in the election wanly prepares to fulfill their usual roles, the president and his entourage are increasingly talking about possible threats.

The rationale of radicalization

At a recent meeting with activists of the Russian People's Front, Putin noted that external enemies would preparing ever more provocations to coincide "with elections to the State Duma, and then with the presidential election. It's a one hundred percent certainty, a safe bet, as they say."

Regardless of their real value, the upcoming elections have been turning right before our eyes into a point of tension on which the state's repressive apparatus has focused. Beginning with the establishment of the National Guard [1], the process has been mounting. Each security agency has now inaugurated its own advertising season, designed not only to remind the president and public of its existence but also to show off its unique capabilities, inaccessible to other competing agencies, for combating potential threats.

Prosecutor General Yuri Chaika has uncovered a plot by the Ukrainian nationalist group Right Sector [2], while in his programmatic article [3], Investigative Committee head Alexander Bastrykin essentially suggested canceling the elections since holding them could prove too dangerous. He made a direct appeal to stop "playing at pseudo-democracy" and provide a "tough, appropriate, and balanced response" to the country's enemies "in light of the upcoming elections and the possible risks presented by the stepping up of efforts by destabilizing political forces." With the appointment of Tatyana Moskalkova, even the previously neutral office of the human rights ombudsman has, apparently, been turned into yet another bastion of the fight against conspiracies.[See The Russian Reader [This Ain't No Disco.](#)]

This nervousness is certainly due to the fact that the growing economic and social crisis has had no visible political fallout for the time being. There have been no mass spontaneous revolts or sectoral strikes, although there has been an overall uptick in isolated labor disputes. The political realm has long ago been securely purged of any uncontrollable opposition, while the president's personal rating has remained phenomenally high. Nothing, it would seem, portends serious grounds for political destabilization this autumn. The absence, however, of real threats itself has become a threat to the internal stability of the state apparatus.

Where does the threat lie? In recent times, it has become obvious that decision-making at all levels and whatever the occasion has been subjected to a rationale of radicalization. Its principle can be described roughly as follows: no new decision can be less radical than the previous decision. Bureaucratic loyalty is measured only by the level of severity. MPs must propose more sweeping laws against latent traitors. Law enforcement agencies must expose more and more conspiracies, while the courts must hand down rulings that are harsher than the harshest proposals made by the security officials and MPs. Permanently mounting radicalism enables officials to increase budgets, expand powers, and prove their reliability, while any manifestation of moderation or leniency can cost them their careers. This radicalization, whose causes are rooted in the political psychology of the Russian elite (which suffers from an almost animal fear of uncontrollability), has set off an extremely dangerous bureaucratic momentum. Its main problem is the inability to stop. It is not only unclear where the bottom is, but who is ultimately interested in reaching that bottom and

leaving it at that.

All this generates a strange situation vis-à-vis the elections, which have generally functioned primarily as a political balancing mechanism for the Putinist system, and even now function in this way. Elections have always been a reminder “not to voters, but to the elite itself” that varying opinions within a clearly defined framework have not only been possible but have also been encouraged. This reminder has been important not out of faithfulness to an abstract principle, but as confirmation that political bodies (first of all, the presidential administration) have had the monopoly on deciding domestic policy, not a military or police junta.

Fixing the broken mechanism?

For the Kremlin, the upcoming elections are overshadowed by the political trauma of 2011, when the smoothly functioning system of managed democracy suffered a serious breakdown. The current chief political strategist Vyacheslav Volodin has more or less consistently focused on making sure the failure of five years ago is not repeated. Volodin’s mission is to fix the broken mechanism with political methods, not by force.

It is worth remembering that, for the greater part of the Putin era, parliamentary and presidential elections were parts of a single political cycle, in which the same scenario was played out. The triumphal success of the ruling United Russia party was supposed to precede and ensure the even more resounding success of Vladimir Putin. In December 2011, however, the cycle’s unity backfired against the Kremlin’s plans. The interval between elections enabled the protest movement to maintain its grassroots energy for several months.

The political rationale of Putin’s third term is now aimed not only at technically but also at conceptually disrupting this cycle. Amidst a sharp drop in confidence in the government, the Kremlin decided last summer to move parliamentary elections up from December 2017 to September 2016, and, on the contrary, postpone the presidential election from March 2017 to March 2018. The point of the maneuver is obvious. The presidential and parliamentary elections must now represent not two parts of the same script but two completely different scripts. In the first script, a limited number of parties, which make up the symphony of the Crimean consensus, will criticize the government and each other, thus competing for the sympathies of the dissatisfied populace. In the second script, the natural patriotic instinct of voters should leave no doubt as to the need to support Putin unconditionally.

The new ideological content was embodied by Volodin’s famous statement: “There is no Russia today if there is no Putin.” [\[4\]](#) This personification virtually means that, as a symbolic father, Putin transcends everyday politics. You can be a liberal or a nationalist, a proponent of greater intervention in the economy or a fan of the free market. You can choose not to like the government or government officials. But the nexus Putin-Crimea-Russia is beyond any doubt. Those who fundamentally disagree with it are simply removed from the Russian political spectrum and branded “national traitors.”

In keeping with this rationale, responsibility for the sharp drop in living standards and the consequences of the neoliberal “anti-crisis” measures has been borne by ministers, MPs, and governors, by anyone except the president. Even now, when the propaganda effect of the “reunification” of Crimea has obviously begun to fade, the president’s personal rating remains high. Thus, according to the latest opinion polls, 81% of respondents trust Putin, while 41% do not trust Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, and 47% do not trust his government overall.

Within the new-model Crimean consensus, United Russia will no longer play the role of the backbone it played in the noughties. Untethered from the non-partisan figure of the president, it will take on the burden of unpopularity borne by its formal leader, Dmitry Medvedev, and his government. The mixed electoral system will enable candidates from

local “parties of power” in single-member districts to dissociate themselves from United Russia, presenting themselves as “non-partisan Putinists” criticizing the soulless federal authorities. Volodin’s scheme involves loosening United Russia’s grip on power and slightly increasing the value of the pseudo-opposition as represented by the Communist Party and A Just Russia.

It is worth noting that the very existence of a bureaucratic mega-party previously played a stabilizing role by dampening intra-elite conflicts. Now they will inevitably come out into the open, including in the shape of inter-party struggles. Of course, the presidential administration counts on being able to effectively ensure compliance with the clear rules of this competition, but there are no guarantees. The managed multi-party system with the “father of the nation” towering over it consummates the new architecture of the Putin regime as a personalistic regime, and becomes more and more vulnerable.

In the new reality of the crisis, Putin’s depoliticization also facilitates a more intensive “natural selection” among bureaucrats at all levels by culling those who have not mastered the art of maintaining the conservative sympathies of the populace while simultaneously implementing what amount to aggressively anti-social policies. The September campaign is supposed to go off without a hitch, culminating in a predictable outcome. Having given a human face to the Central Elections Commission, which was seriously discredited by the previous leadership, Ella Pamfilova [5] is meant to increase this manageability and predictability. It turns out that the upcoming elections are the primary pressure test of the new, post-Bolotnaya Square design of managed democracy. The future of Vyacheslav Volodin and his team, as well as Putin’s willingness to trust them with the extremely important 2018 presidential campaign, probably depends on how smoothly they come off.

From the foregoing it is clear that the objective of reestablishing the rules of managed democracy is directly at odds with the above-mentioned rationale of radicalization, whose standard-bearers are the competing law enforcement agencies. Their individual success in the internal struggle is vouchsafed by the failure of the political scenario, which would give rise to the need for a vigorous intervention by force. After all, the National Guard’s value would be incomparably increased if it put down real riots instead of sham riots [6], and Bastrykin’s loyalty would all the dearer if, instead of the endless absurdity of the Bolotnaya Square Case, he would uncover real extremists. To scare someone seriously, the ghosts have to take on flesh and blood.

Life is everywhere

Marx said that putrefaction is the laboratory of life. Now we see how Putinist capitalism has embarked on a process of gradual self-destruction. The upcoming elections provide a clear picture of how this has been facilitated by two opposing rationales, the political rationale (Volodin and the presidential administration) and the law enforcement rationale. Thus, the first rationale, in order to generate the necessary momentum and expand the range of opinions, must respond to social discontent by providing United Russia’s managed opponents with greater freedom to criticize. Restoring the internal political balance will inevitably lead to the fact that topics related to the crisis and the government’s anti-social policies will become the centerpiece of the entire election campaign. On the other hand, the security forces will destabilize the situation outside parliament. Together, they will do much more to undermine an already-flawed system than the long-term, deliberate efforts of any western intelligence agency.

Of course, Russian leftists should in no way count on events following an automatic course. But it is absolutely necessary to take into account the conflicts of interest within the elite and understand their decisive influence on the shape of the upcoming elections. These elections have nothing to do with the real struggle for power or traditional parliamentarianism in any shape or form. But they are directly related to the internal decomposition of an authoritarian, anti-labor, and anti-social regime. So our policy vis-À-vis these elections should be flexible and remote from all general conclusions. That means we can and should support certain leftist candidates in single-member

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districts. We must use all the opportunities provided by the leftist, socialist critique of the Medvedev government's so-called anti-crisis policies. We must be ready to go to the polls. Or we must be ready to reject them, taking to the streets when the time comes.

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[1] See BBC News [Putin creates new National Guard in Russia 'to fight terrorism'](#).

[2] See Meduza [Russia's attorney general says a Ukrainian nationalist group tried to use the Internet to topple the Kremlin](#).

[3] See The Russian Reader [General Bastrykin Teaches a Lesson in Democracy](#).

[4] See The Moscow Times ['No Putin, No Russia,' Says Kremlin Deputy Chief of Staff](#).

[5] See TASS <http://tass.ru/en/politics/865460> " class="spip_out" rel="external">Russian ex-human rights commissioner elected chief of Central Election Commission.

[6] See The Russian Reader [Smolensk: Rehearsing the Revolution](#).