

Putin's faltering return

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In May 2011 we argued for a modest advance in Russian democracy, namely that both Medvedev and Putin should stand as candidates to offer a modicum of choice between, roughly speaking, modernisation versus continuity.¹ For Putin to stand alone would be disrespectful towards the Russian people. And so it comes to pass for the 4th of March. The two leaders decided that just Putin should stand, and so many people are deeply offended, expressing this through very peaceful street demonstrations led by the new middle classes (for some a 'mink-coat revolution'), and above all through modern social network communications.

The de facto manifesto of the new opposition is being laid out in a series of interviews posted on the internet between Boris Akunin, a fiction writer and democratic activist, and Aleksey Navalny, a lawyer who made his name initially as an anti-corruption fighter. Navalny is the leader, a highly articulate and charismatic speaker. Here is the authentic language of the contest. Navalny argues:

The 'Let's Screw Putin' movement – that's our main task, all the rest is a waste of resources – needs to reduce his rating to 30% around the country and 15-25% in the larger cities and so destroy his real support base. It's a completely achievable aim, given even the official election results for United Russia in the big cities. We have the mechanisms to do this, and the activists as well – we have 100,000 out there, we just need to sort out our campaigning infrastructure and come up with creative and persuasive ways to get our message across

The main thing is that we don't have to lie to people. We can get through to them simply by telling them the plain facts about Putin, his billionaire friends, FSB generals whose children suddenly all turned up working for state banks. The slogan 'United Russia is the Party of Crooks and Thieves' has stuck not thanks to some kind of technology, but because it's the truth...

Those 100,000 people are both a campaign headquarters, and a perfect propaganda machine, capable of spreading necessary information to scores of millions of their fellow-citizens in a very short time. Every member of this many-thousand Machine needs to talk to ten people they know, send emails, put information on social networks. That's all we need.²

¹ "An Elegant Solution to the Medvedev-Putin Problem", CEPS Commentary, May 2011.

² See <http://www.opendemocracy.net/print/63649>

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Putin for his part was evidently knocked off balance by this movement. He booted his main 'political technologist', Vladislav Surkov, out of the Kremlin while refusing an invitation to a TV debate with other candidates. His spokesman said he was too busy.

Then Putin countered with a lengthy article in *Izvestia* on January 16th, with arguments about the merits of political stability and his own achievements in rescuing Russia from the chaos of the Yeltsin period:

In today's world stability is an asset that can only be earned by hard work and with openness to change and readiness for imminent, deliberate and calculated reform. The recurring problem in Russia's history is the aspiration of the elites for a leap, a revolution instead of gradual developments. Russia's experience - as well as the experience of the entire world - shows the destructiveness of historical leaps, of overthrowing in haste without creating.

About the hazards of revolution he has a point. He concluded his article with:

And here I would like again to say why I have agreed to run for the post of President of Russia in 2012. I do not want, and will not, belittle anyone's achievements in establishing our new country. There were many. But the facts remain that in 1999, when I became prime minister and later President, our country was in a deep and systemic crisis. And it is a group of like-minded people - which the author of these lines was to form and lead, supported by an absolute majority of citizens and national unity around common goals - which led Russia out of the impasse of Civil War, which broke the back of terrorism, restored territorial integrity and constitutional order, which revived the economy, and ensured during ten years that Russia had one of the world's highest economic growth rates as well as rising incomes.

Navalny will not however be a candidate for President, since he has not had the time to organise the 2 million signatures required. On the other hand, Mikhail Prokhorov, Russia's richest oligarch, seems able to do so, with many hired hands collecting signatures in shopping districts and metro stations. At first sight, the youthful and imposing (2 metres tall) figure of Prokhorov might be seen as standing for modernity and change. But in reality he is just a Kremlin stooge, supplying a front for those wishing to say there is political competition, whereas he has no chance of success. In mid-January he shared a TV duel with Gennady Zyuganov, the veteran leader of the Communist Party. Prokhorov's political debating skills were dismal, even compared to the worn out, long-playing gramophone record of Zyuganov.

Putin's second major contribution to public debate came in a lengthy article in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* on 23 January, entirely devoted to the issue of ethnicity and multiculturalism. Putin's argument is that while unnamed European politicians (obviously Merkel and Sarkozy amongst others) have been playing the ethnic card to stay in office with the message of 'failed multiculturalism', Russia will by contrast "strengthen the historical state that we inherited from our ancestors, the civilisation that is blessed with an inherent ability to integrate various ethnicities and faiths". Leaving aside the dubious receptivity of this speech in today's Northern Caucasus, its main target seems to be the extreme 'Russia for Russians' nationalist factions in the country's heartland, noticing also the uneasy cohabitation between nationalist and liberal-democratic elements among Navalny's demonstrators.

This is all about domestic politics. The main foreign policy proposition so far was presented by Putin in an article in *Izvestia* on 4 October 2011, where he launched the idea of a Eurasian Union. This would renew the integration of as many as possible states of the former USSR, but would not amount according to Putin to recreating the USSR, since the mechanisms of

communist command and control have obviously gone for ever. Well yes, obviously. But still the meetings of heads of state of these former Soviet republics are not a happy sight. Lukashenko and Karimov are dictators of international pariah status, with Aliiev catching up quickly. Yanukovich reverts increasingly to Putin-style authoritarianism, and there are no recognisable democratic leaders among the rest. Putin resumes Russia's geo-political pressuring of Ukraine through gas pipeline geo-politics, announcing agreement with Turkey to go ahead with a hugely expensive South Stream pipeline across the Black Sea, which only makes sense as a bluff to threaten Ukraine with loss of gas transit income. He is pressuring Ukraine into joining the customs union of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, which would mean dropping Ukraine's free trade agreement with the EU that is awaiting signature.

A second manifestation of current Russian foreign policy is its stance over Syria. This has been symbolised by the recent visit to Russia's Syrian naval base of its only aircraft carrier, Admiral Kuznetsov. Russian TV portrayed it as a demonstration of solidarity with the regime of Bashar al-Assad in the face of Western pressures. The Syrian defence minister visited the ship, appreciating the show of solidarity. This crude geo-political posturing may have been intended to help Putin's re-election, but it also portrays the most bizarre international image at a time when the Arab League wants to get rid of Assad. At the level of foreign policy norms, Russia is standing the UN doctrine of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) on its head, to protect not the people but repressive authoritarian regimes. As damage limitation diplomacy, its latest move is to volunteer to mediate directly between the Syrian authorities and opposition, which the latter rejects.

What would Mr Navalny have to say on Russian foreign policy? Boris Akunin tackled him about this indirectly, "The main reason for [my] mistrust is your allegiance to Russian nationalism... Are you sorry that the USSR is no longer in existence?"

Navalny replies:

Everybody wants their country to be bigger, richer, stronger. That's perfectly normal, and it's what I want as well. ... The USSR was destroyed not by external forces, but by the Communist Party, the State Planning Committee and the Soviet political elite. ... That is historical fact. Another fact is that the core and foundation of the Russian empire and the USSR was our country - Russia. And Russia remains, both economically and militarily, the dominant state of the region. Our task is to preserve and build on that. ... We should not deliberately be making plans for any expansion; our task is to become strong and rich ourselves, and then our neighbours will be part of our zone of influence; they won't have any option.

But beyond this, Navalny has shown no real interest in foreign affairs.

And what should the EU be saying about all this, bearing in mind its declared objective of democracy promotion in the world at large? EU policy towards Russia in this context is easy to define and execute perfectly. Do nothing. Just leave the Russians to make up their own minds. Putin is already trying to rally all loyal Russians to his support by decrying foreign plots. Michael McFaul, a respected democracy promotion academic before joining the Obama team in Washington, and now the new US ambassador in Moscow, already fits the plot perfectly. No need to add to it. The virus of demands for clean democracy seems to develop quite strongly all by itself, with the demonstration planned for 4 February aiming at getting 100,000 people together on the streets of Moscow. With this Putin cannot compete. His attempted counter-demonstration last week in Ekaterinburg flopped, even with busloads of people from nearby towns reportedly bribed with organised visits to IKEA and Metro shopping malls on the way back.

Still Putin's re-election seems a safe bet, given that the other candidates are either unable to stand (Yavlinsky and Navalny), or are just ageing court jesters (Zyuganov and Zhirinovskiy), or are Kremlin stooges (Prokhorov). However the credibility and legitimacy of Putin's leadership have been damaged for his return to power; just how seriously remains to be seen. The idea of his return for two terms has been erased for sure. In the meantime the task is to ensure that the new momentum of ideas and people takes on a real political shape, which is not yet the case, but this will require years – not weeks or months.