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THE END OF THE PUTIN CONSENSUS

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SUMMARY

The “Putin consensus” of the 2000s is over. Although Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is certain to win a hollow victory in the Russian presidential elections in March, the current electoral cycle has weakened his authority and shown the fragility of his regime. Russia is undergoing a process of re-politicisation and is entering a phase of “late Putinism” that is likely to be characterised by elite divisions, continued protests and a gradual ebbing away of popular support. The protest movement that erupted after the falsified vote in the parliamentary election in December has not yet challenged Putin’s grip on power but is nevertheless a symptom of an increasingly unstable Russia.

The European Union should see the current crisis as a clear signal that the Putin system will not last forever. Since December, the Kremlin has already faked counter-demonstrations, harassed the media, indulged in ritualistic but corrosive anti-Westernism, and splurged on social spending to try to re-consolidate support. Putin has also talked of reform, but his weakness will more likely make him more dependent on his oligarchic allies. The EU should begin a long-term dialogue with the Russian opposition focusing on improving anti-corruption practices inside the EU and take measures such as passing a pan-EU “Magnitsky List” to threaten those involved in egregious human rights abuses and corruption with visa bans and asset freezes.

Since December, Russia has been rocked by mass protests demanding clean elections and an end to the culture of immunity on corruption. After a decade of over-control, Russia is undergoing a process of re-politicisation. After the financial crisis exposed Russia’s chronic governance crisis and its dashed dreams of being a rising economic power, as ECFR argued in *Dealing with a Post-BRIC Russia*, the “Putin consensus” has broken down and the “Putin majority” in society has decayed.¹ However, although Russia is restless, it is not yet revolutionary. There is still a passive Putin plurality, largely drawn from the older, poorer and more provincial parts of society that are frightened of change and see no alternative to Putin. The protest movement remains a minority, but it is concentrated in the country’s most dynamic demographics – particularly among Muscovites the new middle classes, the young and the cultural elites. Mobilisation and political activism are increasing from below, with an unprecedented 16,300-plus volunteers to be election observers and online activism gathering steam.

While only slightly over a fifth of Russians agree with the slogan “Not a single vote for Putin”, the old principles of the Putin consensus are no longer popular. More Russians now think the “vertical of power” does more harm than good and want power to be shared between institutions

¹ Ben Judah, Jana Kobzova and Nicu Popescu, “Dealing with a Post-BRIC Russia”, European Council on Foreign Relations, November 2011, available at http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR44_RUSSIA_REPORT_AW.pdf.

rather than held by one man alone.² Only 14 percent of Russians think Putin is the (only) leader who can solve the country's problems.³ Independent polls indicate that Putin remains the first choice of around 40 percent of Russians if those "against all," undecided and not voting are accounted for.⁴ He may claim a first-round win on polling day, but only because an element of fraud is built into the system and because he has weeded out significant opponents. The protests have made it clear that Putin's rule is time-limited and exposed splits in the elite. Alexey Kudrin, who is believed to be a close ally of Putin, has positioned himself as a go-between with the protesters. The once taboo succession question is being debated. There is creeping re-politicisation and re-positioning amongst the oligarchs. In short, Putin's power is now past its peak.

Both Russia and the EU will therefore have to deal with a weaker Putin. The period of "high Putinism", which began in the mid-2000s and was characterised by elite consensus, the absence of meaningful opposition, low activism and high regime popularity, is clearly over. Russia is now entering a restless, uncertain period of "late Putinism", which will be characterised by elite divisions, continued protests, social pessimism and an increasingly unpopular regime. Putin may have personalised power, but he has failed to institutionalise Russia's semi-authoritarian state for the longer term. The regime is showing its age. Putin's social contract – "stability after chaos" and prosperity instead of participation – is beginning to break down.

This memo will argue that the current protest movement is actually an unintended consequence of Dmitry Medvedev's phantom presidency, which built up an intellectual climate and constituency for reform but did not deliver. It argues that Putin's next term will be characterised by anti-Western propaganda for domestic consumption, media harassment, high social spending and inability or unwillingness to reform. The EU should therefore be prepared to engage more broadly with a re-politicising but less predictable Russia. The EU must be constructive and avoid being provoked by short-term survival tactics, but also set clear red lines for any post-election crackdown. The current crisis will leverage a hitherto unrealised aspect of the EU's latent power: the Russian elite is nervous about its prospects at home, but wants to protect its extensive assets in the EU.

How Medvedev's presidency undermined Putinism

The current wave of discontent is the unintended consequence of Medvedev's phantom presidency. Medvedev promised but failed to modernise four "I"s: institutions, investment, innovation and infrastructure. But he did greatly develop a fifth "I": ideas. Medvedev was articulate enough to define Russia's problems, but not powerful enough to do much to solve them. He denounced "legal nihilism", corruption and the "signs of stagnation", fostered new thinking in the establishment by patronising the think-tank INSOR and the Skolkovo research centre, visiting the hip online TV station Dozhd and denouncing the beating of journalist Oleg Kashin. Medvedev built up the case for reform but left reformers bitterly disappointed when he was forced to announce in September 2011 that Putin would return as president.

Meanwhile, the Putin consensus lost its lustre during the Medvedev presidency, as the financial crisis undermined its key claims one by one. His claim that Russia was a growing BRIC economy was damaged when it suffered the deepest recession in the G20 in 2009. His claim to have restored order in the north Caucasus was also increasingly seen as an idle boast. His claim to have rebuilt a strong state and "vertical of power" was exposed as the Kremlin relied on "manual control" to micro-manage industrial disputes and forest fires. In 2011, Putin himself conceded that 80 percent of Kremlin orders to the regions were ignored or not fully implemented.⁵ Medvedev was widely seen as a poor administrator, with the "tandem" exacerbating the dysfunctionality of the system. Even the former Kremlin loyalist and spin doctor Gleb Pavlovsky – an architect of the Putin consensus – admitted that "there is no real vertical of power in Russia, only a vertical of loyalty".⁶

As the Putin system declined under Medvedev, Russian society was changing from below. When Putin took power in 1999 Russian society was overwhelmingly lower-middle class, with large swathes of the population reduced to post-Soviet penury. But although by 2011 a new urban middle class with distinct aspirations had emerged, the Kremlin's political system did not adapt. As academic Mikhail Dmitriyev predicted in spring 2011, the regime faced a "legitimacy crisis" as Putin's post-Soviet rhetoric and the catch-all design of the ruling United Russia party looked increasingly outdated.⁷ The Kremlin-linked Right Cause party project briefly promised to reconnect with the new middle class in 2011 but was scuttled by elite infighting.

² Sergey Smironov, "Dvukh Srokov Dostatochno", *Gazeta.ru*, 7 February 2012, available at http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2012/02/07_a_3991893.shtml; "Rossiyane o vertikali vlasti korruptsi i byurokratii", Levada Center, 9 February 2012, available at <http://www.levada.ru/09-02-2012/rossiyane-o-vertikali-vlasti-korruptsii-i-byurokratii>.

³ "Nasleniya ozhidayut pobedy v Putina na prezidentskikh vyborakh", Levada Center, 1 February 2012, available at <http://www.levada.ru/01-02-2012/78-nasleniya-ozhidayut-pobedy-v-putina-na-prezidentskikh-vyborakh>.

⁴ "Vybory prezidenta dopolnenie k prezentatsii chast 2", Levada Center, 24 February 2011, available at <http://www.levada.ru/24-02-2012/vybory-prezidenta-dopolnenie-k-prezentatsii-chast-2>.

⁵ David Hearst, "Putin: we have lost Russia's trust", the *Guardian*, 12 November 2011, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/12/putin-russia-lost-trust>.

⁶ Unless otherwise stated, quotations are from interviews with the authors.

⁷ Sergey Belanovsky and Mikhail Dmitriev, "Political Crisis in Russia and How it May Develop", Center for Strategic Research, 30 March 2011, abridged version available at http://csis.org/files/attachments/110330_CSR_Political_Crisis_in_Russia.pdf.

Putin is now most unpopular amongst internet users and the newly mobile middle class – the economic “winners of Putinism”, who now feel like losers. The Centre for Strategic Research estimates that the middle class now accounts for at least 25 percent of the population – about one third of the adult population and nearly half of the employed residents of large cities.⁸ The middle class believes it faces stagnation and fears its gains under Putin will be undermined unless there are proper courts, improved policing and an end to rampant corruption and the elite’s oligarchic monopolisation of state resources. Falling real incomes after the 2009 recession have sharply decreased tolerance of corruption and nepotism. At the same time, the Putin majority has been eroded from below by lower-middle class disgruntlement at uncontrolled mass migration, which totalled over 13.8 million in 2011, primarily from Central Asia and the Caucasus.⁹

To make matters worse, the Kremlin mismanaged the election. During the long build-up to the election, Medvedev hoped to secure a second term as president and built up a strong “modernisation” narrative. In December’s election, however, neither Putin nor United Russia had a strong message to sell. They could also no longer rely on “political technology” – the distinctive post-Soviet mix of PR and fraud. In fact, its two most prominent practitioners, Pavlovsky and the “grey cardinal” Vladislav Surkov, supported Medvedev to varying degrees because Putin was becoming harder to sell. It was easy to expose the lazy and unsophisticated election fraud in December. As a result, instead of producing a resounding majority to demonstrate Putin’s strength in the run-up to the presidential election, the Kremlin’s mismanagement of the December election simply demonstrated how unpopular the system had become.

Who are the anti-Putin protesters?

The movement is in fact a coalition of movements that have surged at the same time but not yet coalesced. There is a single organisation committee for the rallies and a new “League of Voters”, but no one party or long-term plan. This coalition may be organising the rallies, but they are wooing rather than leading the protesters, most of whom are making a moral not a party political stance. The protests have been designed to appeal to the widest audience possible with online voting for speakers and a rock-concert atmosphere. They are also home-grown: unlike the “coloured revolutions” or the Arab Awakening, the Russian rallies are notable for their complete lack of interest in the outside world. There are no cries for help, or anger at foreign powers, or desire to join the EU or emulate the United States.

The protest movement is made up of new and old faces, dissenting members of former Kremlin-controlled parties, media elites, hipster activists and radicals. New political faces include the thirty-something anti-corruption activist Alexey Navalny and the environmentalist Evgenia Chirikova, whose star status and “honest” appearances have helped the movement attract the apolitical. Navalny also flirts with nationalism. Old videos show him arguing for migrants to be expelled from Russia like a dentist removes teeth or for Caucasian terrorists to be shot like one swats cockroaches. But it is not his nationalism that makes him popular. Ironically, his main appeal lies in his promise that Russia can become the modern, democratic country that Medvedev promised.

Alongside Navalny are 1990s democrats such as Boris Nemtsov, Garry Kasparov and Vladimir Ryzhkov, who have helped to create an organisational structure but are not as popular. MPs from the formerly tightly Kremlin-controlled party Just Russia, including the well-connected Ilya Ponomarev, have given the movement the credibility of having former regime forces onside. The protests have also been fronted by members of the cultural elite such as the TV star Leonid Parfyonov and the writer Boris Akunin, who have given the movement its sparkle and “trustworthiness” to Russians deeply distrustful of politicians and revolutionaries. The movement’s rallies have been promoted not by the politicians but by young elite Moscow hipster Facebook activists and the editor of glamour magazine *Afisha*, Ilya Krasilshchik, and the editor of online TV station *Dozhd*, Mikhail Zygar. Representative of a young, trendy and aspirational generation of Muscovites, they have grabbed the attention of the capital’s youth. For them, the movement is about making Russia modern, pluralistic and “liveable”.

The movement also includes newly prominent radical neo-Communist leftists like Sergey Udaltsov and “new nationalists” like Vladimir Tor and Konstantin Krylov, which has given it “street cred”. The new nationalists see the movement as a way to stop Putin’s policies of “flooding the country with immigrants” and integrating with Muslim states in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Navalny straddles both liberal and nationalist strands: he calls for Russia to “stop feeding the Caucasus” and to introduce a visa regime for Muslim former Soviet states.

The protest movement is not a government in waiting, nor is it currently capable of seizing power. There is no united long-term plan, united policy programme or economic strategy. This has led much of the Moscow elite to see the protesters as lightweight. “We are reacting, seeing how things go and working out how to respond to them,” says Chirikova. Navalny is a hero for some within the movement but has not emerged as a dominant leader. In terms of organisation and influence, the centre of gravity lies more with the media elites and young Facebook activists who deplore the attempt to “hijack” the movement by the unpopular old democrats and the “disruptive role” of the dissenting Just Russia MPs.

⁸ Sergei Belanovsky, Mikhail Dmitriev, Svetlana Misikhina and Tatyana Omelchuk, “Socio-Economic Change and Political Transformation in Russia”, Center for Strategic Research, 7 November 2011, available at http://csis.org/files/attachments/111107_CSR_Report_November_2011.pdf.

⁹ Statistics from the Russian Federal Migration Bureau, available at <http://www.fms.gov.ru/about/statistics/data/>.

For now, the hipster activists are unsure about what to do next. Ilya Ponomarev from Just Russia says he is thinking of a “tent city” in front of the Kremlin to block (or mock) Putin’s inauguration on 8 May. Other activists prefer to concentrate on building up their own brands.

Navalny has also gone quiet as he builds up his team for the mid-term and avoids spending his political capital too soon. A draft manifesto has already been privately circulated. But his critics have shifted from questioning his nationalism to the accusation that he has not transcended the “opposition party scene”. Navalny was widely ridiculed for choosing to go on holiday in January to Mexico instead of keeping up the pressure. The opposition will survive, however, although it may now depend on Putin making mistakes to catapult it forward. A popular refrain in Moscow is that “Putin is only in danger if he creates his own Gongadze” – that is, a cause célèbre for the opposition to rally around in the same way as the murder of the journalist Hryhoriy Gongadze caused protests in 2000–01 – a prelude to the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine in 2004.

Alongside the protest movement, there are also sudden signs of life within the elite: the bureaucracy is gridlocked, leading players are hedging their bets, and the line between “insiders” and “outsiders” is increasingly blurred. To quote the economics adviser to one presidential candidate: “In non-democratic societies like Russia every master is a former puppet.” The previously unthinkable is now taking place: people are imagining life after Putin. According to Pavlovsky, “the taboo on wanting to be the next president has gone.” Pavlovsky believes the elite is now divided between “those that want to transform Putin, those that want him to stay the same to protect their interests and those that want to sacrifice him to save the system.” Some within the Russian elite are gravitating towards Alexey Kudrin and/or billionaire “liberal” Mikhail Prokhorov. The idea of “Medvedevism without Medvedev” is also gaining ground – for example, in the think-tank INSOR.

Moscow is also abuzz with talk of oligarchs re-politicising and re-positioning themselves, though, as one oligarchic source put it, “we are creating options, not making choices”. Some of the 1990s oligarchs who do not owe their wealth to Putin (such as Viktor Vekselberg, Mikhail Fridman and Pyotr Aven) are increasingly disgruntled with the new generation of “Putin’s friends” (such as Gennady Timchenko, Arkady and Boris Rotenberg, Igor Sechin, and Mikhail and Yury Kovalchuk). Others are gravitating towards “super officials” who have resources due to their state positions and are less likely to remain loyal to Putin to the bitter end. Many opposition politicians, including Navalny and Ponomarev, have built links to prominent oligarchs, one-person removed. Billionaire Alexander Lebedev has put forward Navalny to the board of Aeroflot and the director of the influential state-owned bank VTB has called for Putin to serve only one more term.

Why a weaker Putin will struggle to reform Russia

Although Putin promised to reform Russia, the Putin system is too entrenched to change. Power in Russia is personalised and fused with property, Putin and his allies are mutually interdependent, and without Putin at the top, his friends’ assets are vulnerable, but without their support Putin is also vulnerable. Therefore neither can afford genuine political liberalisation, which would contest their control over the state or resources. In fact, a weaker Putin will be more dependent on elite loyalty, thus less able to cut into the oligarchic monopolisation that defines Russian corruption. A weaker Putin could also mean escalating corruption and capital flight by the Putin oligarchs as they sense his rule is coming to a close. In short, Putin’s next term is unlikely to be as stable as his previous tenures in office.

This means Moscow is likely to be more withdrawn and less co-operative on foreign-policy issues, from frozen conflicts to the Middle East. Russia’s obstructive Syria policy has been presented domestically as standing up to the West. Putin’s pre-election article “Russia in a changing world” has made it clear there is unlikely to be a new Putin in foreign policy.¹⁰ In it, he highlights threats posed by “pseudo-NGOs” and attacks the language policies of Estonia and Latvia and the West’s “punishment” of countries in which it intervenes. He does not mention the word “reset” in relation to the US.

On the other hand, Putin is hinting at a belated round of liberal economic reform. Russia needs to return its economy to the growth of almost 7 percent that it experienced before the financial crisis. Without reform, the economy will tick over, growing by 3–4 percent of GDP. But with improved corporate governance, privatisation, infrastructure investment and liberalisation, it could grow at between 5–6 percent.¹¹ The difference may sound small, but, at lower levels of growth, Russia cannot keep everyone happy: maintaining the “social contract”, keeping the oligarchs loyal and funding modernisation are only possible if growth is higher. Cutting back on one or the other would require strong leadership and political capital, which are both likely to be in short supply.

However, Putin has campaigned in defiantly populist mode, promising dramatically increased salaries for state employees, including teachers, policemen and university lecturers, and more money for healthcare. A weaker Putin will be less willing to tackle mounting economic challenges, though delaying reform only makes him more vulnerable in the long run. Outstanding issues include reforming the pension system and increasing utility prices to repair infrastructure at constant risk of breakdown. The emergence of shale gas and liquid natural gas are mid-term challenges

¹⁰ Vladimir Putin, “Rossia i Menyaushisya Mir”, *Moskovskie Novosti*, 27 February 2011, available at <http://mn.ru/politics/20120227/312306749.html>.

¹¹ Sergei Guriev and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya, “Why Russia is Not South Korea”, *Journal of International Affairs*, Spring 2010, available at http://relooney.info/0_NS4053_908.pdf.

to the Russian economy's energy overdependence, and the regime's budget is highly vulnerable to a collapse in oil prices. Economist Nouriel Roubini predicts that "the economy will stagnate, reform efforts will stumble and Russia will trail its BRIC peers in development when Putin returns to the Kremlin."¹²

Putin is also likely to restrict political freedom. The regime does not have the strength for a violent crackdown, but it is likely to continue to harass independent media such as the radio station Ekho Moskvy, the newspaper Novaya Gazeta and Russian MTV. A weaker Putin is also likely to create the appearance of making concessions to the protest movement. One possibility is that a weak Medvedev, or a stronger Kudrin, will be instructed to head a "coalition" government – probably confined to politicians from the loyalist parties already represented in parliament. Other possibilities include starting an open-ended dialogue with unpopular old democrats in the opposition movement or appointing the oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov, who has been running for president with Putin's consent to gather liberal votes, as a deputy prime minister.

The mid-term consequences of a weaker Putin and a re-politicising Russia will be the emergence of a new wave of opposition and quasi-opposition leaders, especially if the government announces pre-term elections for a new parliament in 2014. This might suit the interests of all sides: it would build on the reforms announced by Medvedev in December 2011, channel the opposition's energies into party-building, and allow the elite to carry on trying to create artificial parties from above. According to opposition leader Vladimir Milov therefore, "Navalny is just the first. A new political generation is planning to enter the fray." But, he warns, "the new generation of Russian democrats will not be pro-Western but populists like (Boris) Yeltsin and (Vladimir) Zhirinovskiy. There will be a new wave of leftist and nationalist feelings." Even hitherto loyal Kremlin parties, Zhirinovskiy's nationalist Liberal Democratic Party, Just Russia and the Communists are likely to be less easy to control.

How the EU should deal with a weaker Putin

The EU should refrain from counter-productive loud support for the opposition movement but at the same time brace itself for, but not be frightened of, a new wave of anti-Western propaganda. If Kremlin smears start to focus on old targets such as the UK and the Baltic states, the EU should calmly refute such accusations and express solidarity with any member state that comes under pressure. At the same time, the EU should also put its own house in better order – for example, by resisting the "Putinisation of Hungary".

According to Konstantin Sonin: "Doing something with Hungary is the best way of helping Russia. In Hungary they're doing what Putin did in two years." The EU should also pass a European version of the US "Magnitsky List", which imposed visa bans and assets freezes on Russians involved in the killing of lawyer Sergei Magnitsky. This would demonstrate that crimes committed within Russia threaten the elite's assets in Europe. "The single most important thing the EU could do is pass the Magnitsky list," says Chirikova. "Putin is a family man, and those on the list are part of his extended Mafia family."

The EU should also engage with the opposition. In particular, it should engage with those among the Russian elite who want "Medvedevism without Medvedev". Co-operation with them on practical issues, which could make the country less corrupt and more efficient, can easily be done through the current policy matrix of "Partnerships for Modernisation". The EU should signal its willingness to help Russia improve its state tender system and reporting on government contracts. The EU should not repeat the mistake it made in the Arab world, where it began serious engagement with opposition leaders too late to influence their views. Corruption is a major issue for the Russian protest movement and protest leaders have rightly argued that the EU is not doing enough to investigate where this money comes from. "The EU needs to help Russia fight corruption and not just see the money coming in as good for its economy," says Ponomarev.

The EU should launch a new anti-corruption dialogue with Russia, including opposition leaders, government officials and anti-corruption activists. The EU delegation in Moscow should host regular workshops, and the EU should arrange working visits of Russian participants to consult EU and member state officials on reforming EU legislation to make it harder for corrupt Russian money to find a safe home inside the EU. Such a dialogue would also provide the EU with an apolitical platform through which it can engage emerging new opposition leaders. Navalny's team thinks that the EU national governments already have sufficient information to investigate current or former members of the elite. The EU should support the development of a pan-European anti-bribery act modelled on the 2010 UK Bribery Act, which would change business practices by EU companies in Russia.

Ironically, many Russians – including both those in government and those in the protest movement – see the EU as an unprincipled power in decline. The EU must largely remain a bystander to the course of Russian domestic events, but it now has an opportunity to reverse that impression and shape the incentives of all sides. The paradox of a corrupt Russian elite spreading its assets in the EU used to be a factor undermining EU principles and solidarity at home. Used skilfully, it can now be used to opposite effect, and could help nudge a divided elite into making the right calls as their once unquestioned power begins to fade.

¹² Tai Adelaja, "A looming 'lost decade'?", the *Moscow News*, 20 February 2011, available at <http://themoscownews.com/politics/20120220/189472454.html>.

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