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COMMENT

Sinikukka Saari
Researcher
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

From stability to stagnation > Lack of political dynamism hinders Russia's development

New discordant voices have recently been heard among the Russian ruling elite. The Russian political system is unable to channel criticism constructively and thus its susceptibility to risk continues to grow.

In the early 2000s Vladimir Putin was a man with a vision: stability and order internally, power and respect internationally. Russia finally had a dynamic young leader capable of defending Russian interests. Russia was able to posit itself as a regional and global great power. Internally, the order and strength of the state came first. The opposition, which was weakening the state, was silenced and business oligarchs and regional leaders were disciplined. The majority of Russians enjoyed rising living standards and the future looked brighter than ever since the Soviet days.

This is the storyline that the Russian 'political technologists' carefully crafted for Putin. From a purely dramaturgical perspective, the story should have ended in 2008 when the last presidential elections were held. Now Putin is no longer the young, vital leader that took the Russian political scene by storm in the early years of the 2000s. Putinmania – widespread support and enthusiasm for Putin – has already evaporated, and support for his candidacy is based mainly on the chronic lack of alternatives.

The political leadership is aware of the dangers of the growing detachment and passivity of the Russian public – hence the constant need for

new and contrived twists and turns in the soap opera plot that is Russian politics.

For a while we lived in the midst of a plot twist called Putin or Medvedev? The media – even the Western one – swallowed the story whole. Day after day, we read endless speculations over whether this and that could possibly be interpreted as a sign of disagreement between the two leaders. The journalistic low-point was reached in August when pictures were released of Putin and Medvedev on a fishing trip. The pictures showed Medvedev steering the boat and this was interpreted as a sign that he would be the next president of Russia. Later, however, it emerged that both men had, in fact, been steering their own boats.

Now that it has been revealed that Putin will be running for the presidency, and that the leaders had already agreed on the strategy 'many years ago', many commentators seem dumbstruck. The media had missed the main point, namely that it really did not make any difference which of the two was the 'chosen one'. They are both embodiments of Russia's over-managed and un-democratic system.

The work of a political technologist in Russia is becoming increasingly difficult as stability is turning

to stagnation. The plot twists are less and less convincing, and disillusionment with the system is becoming more widespread. Recent political technology projects – namely the All-Russian Popular Front (*Obshcherossiiskii narodnyi front*, ONF) and the liberal right-wing party, Right Cause (*Pravoe delo*) – have encountered unexpected stumbling blocks.

The ONF was initiated by Putin in May 2011 and was marketed as an instrument to bring politics closer to ordinary citizens. Their envisaged role was a limited one: to draw attention to concrete practical flaws – such as a need for new desks in the local school. The project was, however, commonly interpreted as the elite's political management project and it failed to generate any real enthusiasm. The ONF seems to have been quietly swept aside since the United Russia party congress in September.

The Right Cause is a typical example of the virtual opposition created by the establishment itself in order to create an illusion of competition in politics. Earlier this year an agreement was reached between the Kremlin and business oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov that he would head and fund the party throughout the elections. In mid-September,

Address

Finnish Institute of
International Affairs

Kruunuvuorenkatu 4
00160 Helsinki

Mailing address

Finnish Institute of
International Affairs

PL 400
00161 Helsinki

Telephone

+358 (0)9 432 7000

Fax

+358 (0)9 432 7799

www.fiia.fi

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Prokhorov took everyone by surprise by announcing that he had had enough of orders issued from the top and he would like his supporters to leave “this Kremlin puppet party”. Untypically of Russian politics, Prokhorov openly named and shamed the first deputy head of staff of the presidential administration, Vladislav Surkov, and claimed that “as long as people like him control the process, politics will be impossible” in Russia.

Prokhorov’s decision means that no new parties will be seriously competing for Duma seats and the current parties represented in it – United Russia, the Communist Party, Zhirinovskiy’s Liberal Democratic Party and (possibly) Fair Russia – will continue their quiet coexistence without any newcomers. This old setup highlights the stagnation in Russian politics and is likely to affect the election turnout negatively.

After the announcement of Putin’s candidacy in the forthcoming presidential elections, quite a few key players in the elite – such as former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin and Medvedev’s adviser Arkady Dvorkovich – expressed their disappointment with the proposed swapping of posts between Medvedev and Putin. This frosty reception is significant because Russia’s current

stability is, to a great extent, built on the elite’s support for Putin.

However, emerging elite struggles should not be interpreted as a sign of potential political liberalisation in Russia. Even if some post-election reshuffles in the ruling elite are likely and new plot twists are undoubtedly already under development, these will hardly resolve the underlying problems in the Russian system: lack of competition and dynamism in Russia and a growing withdrawal from and disillusionment with the dysfunctional system. The system is unable to channel the need for change in any positive, constructive manner and sees healthy competition as a threat.