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COMMENT

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Saving Putin's system > Survival tactics become the strategy

Vladimir Putin's third term as Russia's president allows us to draw parallels with the USSR under the leadership of Yuri Andropov 30 years ago. Political rights are being suppressed, yet Putin has to tread carefully so as not to step on the toes of the elites. Any ideas of modernizing Russia seem to have been abandoned.

When Vladimir Putin was elected president of Russia for the third time one year ago, his immediate task was self-evident. Facing the protest mood of the most active part of Russia's population, which was no longer willing to recognize the legitimacy of his personalistic rule, and the inability of his "power vertical" to govern as before, Putin had to take urgent action to restore the status quo ante.

But a much larger and more pressing goal also presented itself: to ensure that such challenges would not re-emerge in the future and that the system, based on crony capitalism and corruption, selective justice and the preference for loyalty to a superior over administrative efficiency, would be perpetuated.

The chosen line could be termed Andropov lite – after the long-serving head of the Soviet KGB and USSR's leader in 1982–84. When in power, Yuri Andropov apparently believed that the solution to the problem of Soviet non-competitiveness lay not in reforms but in tightening the "discipline" within the ranks. The difference is that this particular role model sought total control over society and its ruling elites. Putin, in turn, while creating legal and administrative mechanisms and sending signals which are meant

to indicate that all-out repression is to be expected is, in reality, not very far removed from the same selective persecution.

Repressive legislation has been adopted but not yet applied. Lamentably, it is likely that some protest movement figures will find themselves behind bars, but widespread arrests would be a double-edged sword. Both the feeling of solidarity and the fear of being the next victim may provide fresh impetus for protest. In addition, the image of a brutal dictatorship would complicate Russia's international undertakings, like its chairmanship of the G20 and G8 in 2013–2014 and, most importantly, the Sochi Winter Olympics in February next year.

Even more caution has to be exercised when trying to modify the contract with the ruling elites. On the one hand, the president needs to make them understand that as beneficiaries of the system, they are obligated to support it, and that the practice of making money in Russia but safeguarding or spending it abroad should be discontinued. On the other hand, if pursued seriously, wouldn't such a line lead to "a revolt of the nobles", the erosion of their loyalty to the suzerain and, eventually, the collapse of the regime?

It is no accident in this context that the presidential bill recently introduced to parliament seeks to ban the foreign bank accounts of state officials, but not their real estate or other property abroad. The bill is full of loopholes and contains very weak sanctions – resignation, not imprisonment – if not complied with. Thus, the mobilizing message dissipates.

Furthermore, Andropov ruled a closed country. Also today, as long as Russia's current leaders prefer to treat the protests as essentially a Western conspiracy, there will be a temptation to limit contacts with the outside world. Sufficient evidence to this effect has emerged recently, ranging from an appalling treason law, potentially criminalizing any contacts between Russian citizens and foreigners, to the tragic ban on the adoption of Russian orphans by Americans. Further actions include Moscow's regrettable withdrawal from an agreement with Washington on legal cooperation and combatting drug trafficking, and a really odd law proposal which would prohibit the production of foreign films on Russian territory.

Clearly, the plan for Russia's modernization has been abandoned, at least for as long as it implies the transfer of not only Western money

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and technologies but also elements of the Western rule of law. And yet, an attempt to isolate the Russian people from the world altogether would be both impossible and downright threatening for the regime as it would contain and sustain the anger inside the country.

So, one year on since re-election, there are few grounds for Vladimir Putin to claim success. He has not eased himself back into the national leader's comfortable armchair, which he occupied before his resignation in 2008. Instead, he has to constantly manoeuvre. The wave of opposition has subsided, but the grass-root causes of the protest have not been addressed. The struggle between the clans at the top for money and resources – not least the conflicts in the energy and defence sectors, covered by the media in great detail – requires constant attention and intervention to avoid a dangerous imbalance. Moreover, for the first time, as evidenced by polls conducted in 2012, the majority of the population is putting the blame for the problems in the country on Putin personally.

The sad conclusion is that the present Putin system does not have a “Plan B”, and nor can it devise one. Vladimir Putin will have to cling on to power until the end, for better

or for worse, for the same reason as other autocrats in the world: no one and no institution can guarantee they will not lose everything upon departure.

The tactics are thus becoming the strategy. Or, more precisely, the tactics for the regime's survival, whether successful or not, are starting to define the strategic future of Russia.