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THE PRICE OF THE RUSSIAN ELECTIONS

EASY TO ACHIEVE, PUTIN'S VICTORY WILL HAVE HUGE COSTS

Voters will give Vladimir Putin the mandate to continue great power politics. This does not augur well for any deconfliction between Russia and the West.

The outcome of the Russian presidential race is a foregone conclusion. Vladimir Putin will extend his stay in power for another term. But the details of the process, and the differences from past elections are nevertheless worth following as they reveal the inner logic of Russia's current political development.

What catches the eye is the Kremlin's desire to make the campaign as risk-free, dull and "dry", and devoid of any semblance of competition as possible. Alexei Navalny, a radical opposition front-runner and proponent of system change who, in recent years, has noticeably strengthened his political positions across the country, has been barred from participating, as anticipated.

To be honest, even if allowed to run, Navalny would not have had much chance of becoming a real challenger to Putin. His platform, mixing liberal and leftist

slogans, looks inconsistent and unconvincing to too many. Yet, as a figure, he could have mobilized the opposition-minded voters. In practical terms, that could have set in motion a mechanism of election monitoring, in large cities at least, seriously complicating potential irregularities. Pressure on the "concerned citizens" could have woken up the ghost of the massive protests of winter 2011–2012, whereas tolerating the opposition mobilization could have created a situation in which the winner, Putin, would not have received the majority in Russia's megapolises, which would have been an embarrassment.

Now the Kremlin can play it safe. Navalny's appeal to his supporters to boycott the elections, even if successful, cannot be as effective. Putin will not have to explain why with the 85% approval rating that he enjoys, he will

actually receive the votes of 30 or 40% of the whole electorate. What will matter is that he will gather 70% or more of all votes cast.

And he simply cannot receive less. Neither Pavel Grudinin, the new face of the Communist Party, nor the veteran of right-wing populism, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, nor the journalist and show-woman Kseniya Sobchak – if she is eventually included in the ballot – can significantly increase their respective voting base in the remaining two months.

That said, however, the 2018 election is not a sham. It is a referendum-like confirmation, an approval of the choice made earlier.

Arguably, if paradoxically, this conclusion may be less true for the elites at large. Their opinion is not really so important. First, unlike in Ukraine for example, big business in Russia has long since lost any independent political role. Second,

the new model of relations with the regime has already been imposed upon the elites. Earlier, they comfortably observed the principle of “loyalty in exchange for prosperity”. But when in 2017 the Russian Economy Minister, Alexei Ulyukaev, was sentenced to eight years in prison and 20 governors were fired, some with the prospect of also standing trial, the formula was modified to “loyalty in exchange for personal freedom, for now”. Of course, some individuals will try to stay out of the game or even emigrate, but most have been part and parcel of the system for too long and apparently prefer to throw in their lot whatever happens. Even in the face of personalized Western sanctions, they have more to lose if they try to defect.

But the rest of the population, which has not been a part of the privileged class and does not have that much to lose, needs to be won over. The “social contract” with them has to be renewed through attraction, not coercion.

Rhetoric about “stability” will not do the trick, for the simple reason that, at least in terms of household economics, there is none. The real incomes of Russians have been going down for four consecutive years and are now lower than at the beginning of Putin’s current term.

Twenty million people living below the poverty line can hardly appreciate this kind of “stability”.

Putin’s promise of change after 18 years in power would not be credible. Technological progress and digitalization will gradually take place, no doubt, but this has little to do with more effective, less corrupt and more people-friendly governance.

Popular expectations and perceived policy results meet only in the foreign policy field. According to a November 2017 opinion poll by the reputed Levada Center, 82% of respondents believe that Russia should retain the role of a great power in the future, while only 13% disagree with this. And 72% – a record high for Putin’s epoch, compared to 31% in 1999 and 47% in 2011 – think contemporary Russia is a great power. The annexation of Crimea, preventing further NATO enlargement in the post-Soviet space, notwithstanding the Western economic sanctions, military and political success in Syria and instilling a new sense of mission in the armed forces – are all viewed as proof of Russia’s restored global status. The election date, March 18, the fourth anniversary of the “reunification” with Crimea, will in itself serve as a powerful symbol and reminder.

The problem is that the popular mandate to continue the great power politics will seriously limit Russia’s foreign policy choices after the elections. This implies that the Russian-Western confrontation will continue, defence expenditure will remain high, and conflicts in Ukraine, Syria and possibly elsewhere will drain Russia’s resources, while foreign investment and modern technologies will not be forthcoming.

Electoral victory will be a low-hanging fruit for Vladimir Putin. But it will be anything but cost- and risk-free both for Russia itself and the outside world. /