



Wasted Chances, Shattered Hopes: Systemic Reforms in the Russian Way

The processes taking place in modern Russia cause one to reflect on the possibility of changing Russia's political system. The presidency of Dmitry Medvedev, conducted under the banner of modernization, and recently also characterized by the activation of Russian society and the objection of a part of it to the present political structure, has become a starting point for a great deal of debate, discussion and predictions regarding systemic reforms in the country. While the stability of the Russian system has been shaken in the recent months, it would be unwise to assume its complete breakdown. The changes in the society's consciousness have obliged the ruling authorities to work out the new forms of communication. On the one hand, the authorities may want to try and hold on to power at any cost, not allowing the opposition to strengthen their position. On the other hand, the ruling elites have the chance to meet the social expectations and with small steps slowly start to liberalize the system. A third option would be merely to effect cosmetic changes to the system. An analysis of the steps taken thus far would suggest that the Kremlin is pursuing the third option. This leaves us with a question as to how such a solution might influence the durability of the present system and the legitimacy of the present definitions of the Russian system.

In the current issue of the “Pulaski Policy Papers” our Research Fellow Olga Nadskakuła analyses the current state of Russian systemic reforms. “Due to the criterion of dominance of individual parts of the state apparatus, one can describe the Russian political system as bureaucratic-economic-security authoritarianism. What one is dealing with here is the balancing of the respective influences of the natural resources and fuel sector against the security and special services community and the bureaucratic apparatus. A new element here is the specific technology of power. The system's personalism is especially important due to the deterioration of state institutions in order to strengthen their control. Those which still exist serve a decorative purpose.”

We encourage you to read the new issue of the “Pulaski Policy Papers”!

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The Casimir Pulaski Foundation is an independent, non-partisan think tank with a mission to promote freedom, equality and democracy, as well as to support actions of strengthening civil society. The foundation carries out such activities as conducting scientific research, preparing publications and analyses, organizing seminars and conferences, providing education and support for leaders in Poland and abroad. The Casimir Pulaski Foundation is one of only two Polish institutions that have a partnership status with the Council of Europe and is a member of the Group Abroad – an umbrella organization of top 40 Polish NGOs working outside of Poland.

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Putinism

The character of the present political system in Russia was formed during the presidency of Vladimir Putin. Russian sociologist Lev Gudkov thinks that Putinism is a peculiar form of post-Stalinist authoritarianism where the political elites wield power on behalf of bureaucratic clans and corporations. It is not only a conservative system of power but, in addition to that, it has been designed to block the development of civic society and prevent its modernization. The system is steered by the security and special services community, which take advantage of the state and society for its own gains.

Similar terminology has been used by Juan Linz. According to him, all the most important elements of post-totalitarian authoritarianism can now be observed in Russia, i.e. the huge influence of the bureaucracy and the defence and law enforcement institutions, social apathy and passivity, along with the violation of the rights of certain social groups.

Due to the criterion of dominance of individual parts of the state apparatus, one can describe the Russian political system as bureaucratic-economic-security authoritarianism. What one is dealing with here is the balancing of the respective influences of the natural resources and fuel sector against the security and special services community and the bureaucratic apparatus. A new element here is the specific technology of power. The system's personalism is especially important due to the deterioration of state institutions in order to strengthen their control. Those which still exist serve a decorative purpose. The oft-quoted comment by Boris Gryzlov, the chairman of the State Duma in the years 2003-2011, is the most pertinent statement here: "The parliament is not a place for a discussion."

The consequences of such a composition of this type of rule, among others, are: excessive centralization, internal conflicts, inability to make decisions and stagnation. This may easily lead to a loss of flexibility of the regime and its inability to adapt to the changing conditions, and later to a gradual loss of efficiency in governing. The system does not only react to a crisis but often also causes its internal crises as it does not possess the mechanisms to react to an emergency and any means to maintain the system of control. The system will endure in this form as long as the popular discontent does not reach the level of an explosion.

The new image of the old system

The presidency of Dmitry Medvedev has brought a light of hope for a change of the political system in the Russian Federation. Putin's successor was conscious about his image as a liberal leader who cared about reforming the country. The new rhetoric corresponded with the expectations of Russian society that needed far-reaching liberalization. Russians no longer accepted former relations between the state and society. The old Putinist system, a guarantee of order, security and welfare in exchange for loyalty, lost its gleam, which was clearly proven by the protests that took place after the parliamentary elections in December 2011 and the presidential elections in March 2012. Medvedev responded to this change of mood by introducing a series of reforms, among which there was a bill reintroducing the direct elections of governors. He also signed a document that exempted parties from collecting signatures before elections to the State Duma, regional parliaments and local governments (although signatures do still need to be collected for presidential elections, their number has been radically decreased from two million to three hundred thousand for independent candidates, and to a hundred thousand for candidates from non-parliamentary parties). Moreover, the law that said a party should have at least forty thousand members at the moment of its registration was abolished. The new law has decreased this number radically to five hundred.

It is worth considering just how the new laws may influence the Russian political reality, especially in the situation where they arouse heated controversies among analysts, political scientists and among a part of Russian society. The phenomena accompanying, for example, the reform concerning the governors, should cause one to reflect upon the real reasons for the bills being implemented. In 2004 Vladimir Putin abolished the direct elections of governors. According to the former regulations, local legislative assemblies, by the motion put forward by the President, approved heads of regions. Putin's main purpose was to prevent the regions from attaining too great an independence from the centre. The new law proposed by Medvedev stipulates the return to a direct election of governors with the assumption that every candidate is required to go through two filters: municipal and presidential. The former assumes that a potential governor has to secure himself support ranging from 5 to 10 percent of deputies from the municipal assemblies; the latter refers to the obligation of consulting candidatures with the President. The first elections are to take place in October 2012 in those regions where the governors' terms in office are coming to an end. Nonetheless, the wave of dismissals of regional heads initiated with the announcement of the project of the new bill makes the plausibility of the new document questionable. Most regions have already had their new heads called up under the old law so their term will end in four years time.

The conclusion is that despite the extravagant promises of the Kremlin regarding greater involvement of society in Russia's political life, these postulates will not be realized very soon. The Kremlin elite wants to have control over the situation in the regions and it is concerned about social activation and governors becoming independent. The new law looks good on paper and is a propaganda trick aiming to help 'liberalize' the ruling authorities' image, and not to introduce real changes in the political system.

The situation is similar with the law regarding political parties. The decrease in the necessary number of party members for registration will not so much activate different circles to create new parties but will divide the opposition's electorate. A dispersed opposition will become a weaker opponent for the Kremlin than one large competitive party. Political scientists in Russia predict the creation of a number of small fringe political parties, which will in reality end up as ephemeral entities, without ideology or influence, serving a purely decorative purpose. Additionally, the ruling power's attitude to opposition forces will not change. It is still difficult to notice any great will for any further dialogue;

instead, only the need to marginalize protesters and split their ranks is apparent. One more argument in favour of the assumption that the Kremlin elite is not going to reduce its power and lead to any real systemic change would be Putin's election statements, which serve as a program of activities for the present term in office. Here one has a vision of a welfare state, governed with a firm hand. Putin promises that his actions will be directed towards ensuring the stability of the present system, addressing not the educated middle class here but the poor citizens of Russia's provinces. As a matter of fact in February 2012, Putin, still Prime Minister at this point, said: "Our society is totally different today than at the beginning of the first decade of the 21st century. There are many who are better off, more educated and more demanding. The change of demands placed before the ruling power and the middle class to leave behind their narrow world of building their own prosperity, these are all the results of our efforts. We have all worked for that." These words of understanding and acceptance of the new processes taking place in Russia, spoken by the former Prime Minister do not correspond with his program for the present presidential term. The situation in Russia has been changing radically, and the old answers proposed by Putin are no longer able to meet the new challenges that, in the long run, may bring about the collapse of the present logic of ruling Russia.

Conclusions

Russia's present internal situation does not provide grounds for formulating hypotheses about a possible near resolution of the growing conflict between the Kremlin and the protesting opposition. As for the Kremlin elite, it is highly probable that it will continue the policy of putting the screws on those who oppose too loudly the rule of the Putin-Medvedev tandem. In the near future, one is likely to see the prospect of profound systemic reforms being withdrawn by the ruling authorities. They will try to maintain their dominant position in the country, which will lead to a further loss of social confidence in the Kremlin.

1. The continuation of the Putin social and economic policy means that the worst tendencies of the present system, i.e. systemic corruption and a poor climate for investment will not be restrained. Therefore, Poland and the EU should not await the expected internal reforms in Russia and liberalization of the system within the 'Partnership for Modernization' initiative.
2. With the return of Putin to the Kremlin and his will to maintain the present political system one should expect further attempts at uniting Russian society against the common enemy – the West, and at the same time a revitalization of anti-western rhetoric.
3. Poland and the EU should work towards increasing the influence of Russian society on political decisions made in the country. This would intensify the process of Russia's democratization and, in the long run, would help stabilize the situation in the country and soften existing antagonisms between the ruling authorities and society.
4. On the one hand, the EU should develop a common policy towards Russia, try to convince the Russian political elite of the justness of internal reforms. For the West, the liberalization of Russia would mean greater security for economic interests.
5. On the other hand, Poland and the EU should not support any of the sides involved in the internal conflict in Russia, so as to avoid the risk of any accusations of interference into the Russian Federation's internal matters.

The Casimir Pulaski Foundation

is an independent think tank which specializes in foreign policy, with a mission to promote freedom, equality and democracy, as well as to support actions of strengthening civil society. The foundation carries out activities both in Poland and abroad, among others in Central and Eastern Europe and in North America.

The Casimir Pulaski Foundation was founded due to political changes that took place in Poland after 1989. The principal values of Casimir Pulaski (freedom, justice and democracy) are an inspiration for every initiative undertaken by the Foundation. A few of the Foundations activities include: conducting scientific research, preparing publications and analyses, organizing seminars and conferences, providing education and support for leaders (www.instytutprzywodztwa.pl).

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