

BULLETIN

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The Political Situation in Russia Before the Presidential Elections

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The anti-Kremlin protests in Russia, which were provoked by electoral fraud revealed during the December parliamentary elections, indicate a resurgence in political activity by the Russians and the arousal of their hopes for the modernization of the country. Although Vladimir Putin's victory in the upcoming presidential election on 4 March seems to not be endangered, a continuation of his policies based on limited political pluralism and a leading role for the state in the economy could lead to even greater social unrest. EU countries, including Poland, should persuade Russia's authorities that the democratization of their political system has positive aspects for both society and the ruling elite.

Ahead of Russia's presidential elections on 4 March, a victory for Vladimir Putin seems indisputable. In polls conducted at the end of February by the state-run public opinion centre VCIOM, Putin received 53% support and maintains a significant advantage over the other candidates: Gennady Zyuganov (11%), Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (9%), Mikhail Prokhorov (6%), and Sergei Mironov (4%). If these figures hold true on election day, Putin's public support would be significantly lower than it was in 2004 at his first re-election (71%) or in 2008 when his ally Dmitry Medvedev became president (70%). Moreover, if Putin does not receive more than 50% of the vote, a second round will be held—something that hasn't happened in Russia since 1996.

Putin's Shrinking Support. Indeed, Putin's high poll numbers in the run-up to Sunday's elections does not mean he enjoys stable support among the majority of Russians. After parliamentary elections on 4 December 2011 and the revealing of several examples of voter fraud, Russia's largest cities saw massive anti-Kremlin protests. The demonstrations are unprecedented in post-Soviet Russia and mainly involve young people disenchanted with Putin's 12 years in power, during which Russia has become (even more) corrupt and quasi-authoritarian. What is interesting is the demonstrators are not supporting any candidate in the presidential elections but are calling for voters to participate in them but to vote against Putin.

The massive nature of the protests is associated with rapid civilizational changes in Russian society and the weakness of the authoritarian regime as well. The Russian authorities, despite enormous administrative resources (including special services) and maintaining strict control over many newspapers, radio stations and TV channels, are not very effective in the face of the huge popularity of the Internet in Russian society. In the past four years, the number of Internet users in Russia has grown from 35 million people to more than 60 million, which means it is the highest in Europe. Russians are willing to listen to independent bloggers, such as Alexei Navalny, who with small financial resources and the Internet is able to resist the Kremlin's propaganda and expose various cases of corruption arising from unclear relationships between business and politics.

The protesters against Putin—mainly young people from big cities—are not so burdened by the negative experiences with the socio-economic instability of the '90s as is the older generation of Russians. For the young people living in Moscow or St. Petersburg, nepotism, corruption and the lack of the rule of law are fundamental problems that prevent the development of their professional lives. Russia's youth also feel cheated by President Medvedev, who promised that he would use his office to bring modernization to Russia. Medvedev finally acquiesced to Putin's wishes and decided not to run again for president, stepping aside for Putin. Russians saw this announcement as a retreat from reform initiatives in order to safeguard the interests of the ruling elite.

Main Challenges for Putin's Presidency. Although the protests are by no means representative of all of Russian society, the increasing number of disgruntled Russian citizens represents the most significant challenge to Russia's current leadership. So far, the government has adopted a two-pronged strategy that most likely will continue after the presidential election. On the one hand, the Kremlin is conducting a dialogue with the opposition: On 20 February, President Medvedev invited opposition politicians to his residence in Gorki and promised to accelerate the liberalization of the political system. On the other hand, the Kremlin is attempting to discredit the organizers of the anti-Putin protests and to interfere with the functioning of some independent newspapers, such as *Novaya Gazeta*, and radio stations, such as Ekho Moskv.

The Kremlin seems unsure of how to handle the possibility of fraud during Sunday's elections. It may fear a repeat of what happened after the parliamentary elections when vote-rigging provoked the wave of demonstrations. However, without administrative control over the voting process Putin may not receive more than 50 percent of the vote. That would force a second round of voting, which would certainly strengthen the opposition. The regional authorities responsible for the elections and the final outcome would then try to influence Putin's vote using administrative measures (financial incentives, a collective vote, etc.), rather than opting for direct electoral fraud. Therefore, huge differences in the electoral results between the large urban agglomerations (Moscow, St. Petersburg) and the Russian provinces are expected—maybe even larger than during the December parliamentary elections.

Putin's victory in the presidential elections is unlikely to limit the Russians' political activities, especially among the youth, who have been very passive over the past decade. But regardless of whether the protests will continue after the elections, a rising civic consciousness usually results in more critical and active behaviour towards policies adopted by the authorities. If Putin does not change his policy of a growing role for the state in the economy and limited political pluralism, he may significantly lose popularity during the coming six-year presidential term. For the Russian political and business elite, this situation would require new solutions to secure their position as well as to address society's growing expectations.

Conclusions for Poland and the EU. The liberalization of the political system, which has become an important expectation of the Russian protesters, could stabilize the political situation in the country and support its economic development. For this reason, it is positive both for Russian society and its elite. Poland and other EU countries should look to persuade Russia's leadership to open the country's political system. This includes putting pressure on Vladimir Putin and others in power in Russia to honour commitments they made during the election campaign to liberalize the country's politics, i.e., to simplify the registration of political parties.

Poland and other EU countries should not, however, be clearly involved on either side of the dispute between the opposition and the ruling elite and should make it quite clear that the Western community counts for democratic values and principles and not for specific political groups. For the EU states, the current anti-Kremlin protests in Russia also demonstrate they should be more involved in the development of Russian civil society and should effectively support youth, cultural and research exchanges with Russia.