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The Russian Elections and their Aftermath

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The Russian presidential election, won – as predicted – by Vladimir Putin, was dramatic, not because of the results, which were known ahead of time, but because of the public protest of recent months that marked the election propaganda and preparations. Manifestations of the protest continued even after the election and may be expected to constitute a permanent feature of the Russian political reality, thereby adding to the host of internal issues that challenge Russian rulers. An additional, perhaps even historic, challenge for the Russian establishment lies in security and foreign affairs, where the future of Russia's international standing will be determined. These became central issues in Putin's election campaign, as he tried to outline his future policy. What does this platform consist of?

As for internal matters, in addition to longstanding, familiar issues as well as the worsening economic challenges, the central issue – during the election campaign and beyond – is the social protest. The protest failed to affect the outcome of the election, both because Putin was the only viable candidate, as per the current Russian political system (fashioned by Putin himself), and because the majority of the Russian public still clings to the idea that a strong leadership is preferable over democracy for its own sake. To the Russian public Putin still presents as someone who can impose law and order, revitalize the economy, and advance Russia's international position. However, the very fact of the protest, instigated by elements in the middle class and especially by educated young people who are frustrated and angry with the corrupt government, shows that winning the election was actually the easy part. For this government, the real test still lies ahead, if it is interested in surviving politically. Consequently, Putin, who understands that the Russian protest movement may well endanger his rule, may be expected to act on two parallel levels. On the one hand, as already evident during the election campaign, he will attempt to damage the protesters' image and certainly their organizational infrastructures; they have already been painted as a product of foreign subversion. On the other hand, he will also attempt to calm the public, improve the image of his government,

and implement more liberal policies, including changes in the system of governance and the appointment of individuals identified as liberals to senior government positions.

As for foreign affairs, which were and remain the central axis of government activity in Russia: in the Russian mind, the goals of the nation's foreign policy ought to be the central cohesive element of the Russian people and the instrument of Russian success, as well as the means to advance Russia's international position, currently weathering a crisis. Therefore it is no coincidence that Putin selected security and foreign affairs to be the central theme of his election campaign, and cast his security and foreign affairs doctrine as the nation's supreme objective. His rhetoric reflects concern about the loss of Russian relevance on the international arena, which would have serious implications for the nation's future. Thus, it is critical to rehabilitate Russia's status as a world power and close the gaps between it and other powers, lest it soon find itself marginalized within the international community.

Using blunt security rhetoric, Putin's campaign presented a range of threats facing Russia and stressed that Russia must make careful plans to upgrade its security potential and adopt an assertive foreign policy that ensures a response to the new challenges it faces. The list of threats did not fail to include the accusation that the West is engaged in political subversion against Russia (the reference being to the social protest movement) under the guise of "soft power" avenues. Putin linked what is happening in Russian society to the ramifications of the Arab spring, which was also presented as the fruit of the West's "soft power" philosophy, although it was ultimately translated into aggressive intervention in the sovereign states of the region – a phenomenon that Russia seeks to curb. Also in the context of the Middle East, Putin's campaign stressed that Russia has been stripped of its major political achievement of recent years, i.e., the markets that have been usurped by the West. The Islamic threat against Russia, both in the Middle East and within Russia's own borders, was likewise included. Putin promised that Russia will not concede its regional status and will work to rebuild it. Among the political goals in the Middle East, his campaign defined the following: preserving a pro-Russian political axis (i.e., Iran and Syria), rebuilding the crumbling relations with the Sunni camp and Turkey, and reviving the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, in which Russia seeks to play an influential role. No less important is attaining understandings with regional states regarding the restraint of Islamic activity on Russian soil.

It is clear that this part of the rhetoric, which turned into the key issue in the election campaign and is directed primarily against the West, also means to define Russia's enemies for the Russian public. If so, do the statements reflect a policy that is expected to be implemented during Putin's new term in office? This is where the situation is murky. While Putin engages in aggressive language, it is primarily meant for internal

consumption, aimed both at the election and at closing the ranks. Looking to foreign affairs diverts attention away the protest movement now challenging the future of his term.

Russia's future status is of course a critical question for Putin too; the same is true of the threat to the nation's future should Russia fail to regain a satisfactory international position, i.e., again become a world power. It is also clear that despite its difficulties on the international arena, especially in the Middle East, Russia still has great potential to challenge the current world order and force the international community to take its interests into account. However, it is equally obvious that Russia must develop cooperation with the West, especially the United States, if only to allow Russia to continue economic – and particularly technological – development as a condition for realizing the process of modernization it so desperately needs. Therefore it is reasonable to think that after the elections, Russia's policy will actually be somewhat more moderate than before.

Putin's rule lost a significant portion of the public support it enjoyed in the past. Therefore, as Russian expectations for social, economic, and political changes rise, Putin cannot take an extended, calm period in office for granted.

