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- If Russia is to follow an evolutionary path to democracy, then the regime must be ready to draw the so-called 'non-systemic' opposition into political processes. This gradualist formula for democratic change is also the formula for political stability.

- A number of liberalising reforms conducted by the regime in response to widespread protests following the December 2011 State Duma election gave grounds for optimism that this process is now underway.

- However, any hopes that these events would kick-start democratic reforms were short-lived. Rather than draw in opponents, the regime has sought to isolate them, using a combination of reform, non-reform, dividing tactics and repression.

- But the results have not been positive. The non-systemic opposition is under increasing pressure, having seen its options all but reduced to more protesting. It is also showing signs of radicalisation. At the same time, the Kremlin's uncompromising approach is undermining regime stability.

- The pressure is building in the Russian political system. The combination of repression and radicalisation could easily see political stagnation degenerate into instability and the EU should take this new dynamic into account in its future policy planning.

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At the end of 2011, Russian politics took a surprising turn. After tolerating sub-competitive elections for much of the previous decade, society reached its tipping point as tens of thousands took to the streets to vent their frustrations at election fraud in the aftermath of the State Duma election. Using the white ribbon as their symbol and voicing demands for fair elections as well as democratic reform, this 'protest movement' persisted throughout 2012, as Russia experienced an unprecedented wave of 'mass actions' in towns and cities across the federation. While the root cause of these protests continues to be debated, its consequence appeared clear cut: Russia had witnessed the re-awakening of opposition politics with the potential to cajole the post-Yeltsin regime into the next round of democratic reform.

By the spring of 2012, the out-going administration of Dmitri Medvedev made two key concessions that promised to liberalise politics and draw in the non-systemic opposition.[1] Amendments made in April 2012 to the law 'On Political Parties' introduced sweeping changes to the party system, easing restrictive registration requirements. By the summer of 2012, the number of parties in the country had almost quadrupled, with dozens more waiting to be registered. This reform was quickly followed by the reconstitution of governor elections, a law signed by Medvedev in May, replacing the procedure of presidential appointment and overturning what was perhaps the single biggest democratic deficit of Vladimir Putin's second term of office (2004-2008). In the meantime, the protest movement took steps to consolidate, forming an opposition 'Coordination Council' in October 2012, marking its transformation from 'protest movement' to 'organised opposition'.

But a year is a long time in politics, and what appears to be progress is often something quite different. As argued below, rather than conduct genuine reforms to provide a reasonable constitutional outlet for the non-systemic opposition, the regime has pursued a strategy of isolating them from political processes altogether, using a combination of regressive reform, non-reform, dividing tactics and, increasingly, repression. This strategy has served to weaken the non-systemic opposition, but also to radicalise them. However, any notion that the Kremlin is benefiting from this uncompromising approach is erroneous. Rather than stabilise the political situation, this approach is undermining regime stability.

As a result, it is difficult to see any winners 12 months after the December 2011 State Duma election. Despite the efforts of both sides to strengthen their respective positions, the non-systemic opposition and the regime are under pressure like never before. But with the non-systemic opposition looking and sounding more radical, and with the regime intent on restoring its authority at all costs, despite the clear risks entailed, this pressure continues to build.

The false promise of reform

On February 20, 2012, and against the backdrop of huge demonstrations in Moscow and several other cities, President Medvedev took the unprecedented step of meeting with representatives of the non-systemic opposition, including Boris Nemtsov, Vladimir Ryzhkov and Sergei Udalstov – vocal critics of the regime and key figures in the protest movement that was gathering momentum. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss Medvedev's plans for easing party registration requirements and re-instigating the direct election of regional governors. Both the meeting and the planned reforms were seen as a concession to the non-systemic opposition who, among other things, were demanding greater participation for excluded groups in the electoral process.

However, when reviewing the past year in Russian politics, it is clear that the country's democratic development, as well as the overall health of the political system, took a step back largely as a consequence of these reforms. Not only were they pre-meditated attempts to strengthen the regime, they also created a host of new obstacles for the non-systemic opposition. In fact, these 'regressive reforms' were part of the overall strategy to isolate the non-systemic opposition from larger political processes.

1 'Non-systemic opposition' refers to those individuals and groups denied the opportunity to compete in elections and participate in formal politics. Conversely, 'systemic opposition' includes registered opposition parties and individuals who typically have a constructive relationship with the regime and are 'part of the system'.

This is particularly true of Medvedev's amendments to party law as the first major reform of 2012. Russia's party system, it should be noted, had largely consolidated in the period 2001–2011, thanks in no small part to the 2001 law 'On Political Parties', used to control the opposition and promote United Russia. But, by the beginning of 2011 it was clear that this party system was losing its attraction for the regime, making its overhaul a likely task for the incoming Putin administration in 2012. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that the government was planning to ease party registration requirements as far back as 2010. Although this raises some doubts regarding Medvedev's own input into this reform, it does show that party-system liberalisation was in the pipeline well before the appearance of the protest movement.[2]

The essential background to this law and the reason why party-system reform was likely to happen is found in the same reason why falsification was such an issue in December's State Duma election – United Russia's dwindling popularity. The overwhelming problem with the party system centres on United Russia's inability to collect a significant portion of the pro-presidential vote. Both Putin (2000–2008) and Medvedev (2008–2012) enjoyed consistently high approval ratings for most of their presidential terms, but United Russia has only been able to garner a fraction of this support at election time, despite playing on its close association with both presidents. Irrespective of United Russia's constitutional majority in the 2007 State Duma election, the results of regional assembly elections, 2008–2011, reveal that the party's average vote share was steadily contracting. In 2008, United Russia competed in 16 regional elections, gaining an average 64 per cent of the vote, but by 2011 this figure had dropped to 50 per cent.[3]

As such, the explanation for Medvedev's party-system liberalisation is that the regime needed to arrest United Russia's electoral slump and so avoid the more drastic alternatives of replacing the party (with, for example, Putin's All-Russian Popular Front) or resorting to more electoral fraud. With party registration requirements relaxed to such an extent (membership requirements were reduced fortyfold) the calculation is that the opposition will be diluted in a flood of new parties, enhancing United Russia's brand name and conservative message at the same time. But, by increasing the number of parties and decreasing the number of unified voting days for regional elections to one per year (Putin signed this amendment in October), the regime has also opted to overwhelm the electorate and so further complicate the task for newly-formed opposition parties.[4]

The regional elections in October 2012 also revealed some of the additional barriers that party-system liberalisation will present to the opposition. Although too early to talk of a flood of new parties, these elections did see a number of Kremlin-backed 'spoiler parties' chip away at the electorate of United Russia's main competitors. In the Penza region (Volga Federal District), the newly formed 'Communists of Russia' picked up 2.7 per cent of the vote, while in the far eastern Sakhalin region 'The Communist Party of Social Justice' gained 3 per cent. These parties represent anti-politics in its purest form, organisations created to shave off part of the opposition vote, mainly from Gennadi Zyuganov's Communists (CPRF), but not to win elections or represent any constituency, except power and the regime itself.

It should be noted that October's elections were carefully staged and low-key (evident in the low turnout) in order to guarantee a confidence boosting victory for United Russia (the party collected an average 61 per cent of the vote in six regional assembly elections). Reports of electoral fraud were also rife – suggesting that the Kremlin had not fully learnt the lesson from December's election.

2 The newspaper *Kommersant* ran a story on October 28, 2011 talking of potential changes to the way public associations, non-profit organisations and parties were registered, citing a government bill signed by First Deputy Prime Minister, Igor Shuvalov, in August 2010.

3 United Russia competed in 11 regional assembly elections in 2009 and 14 in 2010, gaining an average vote share of 60 and 53 per cent respectively (www.cikrf.ru).

4 Prior to this change, the bulk of elections occurred twice yearly on unified voting days in March and October. From 2013, these elections will take place once a year in September, with a proposal to reduce the length of the campaign period also under consideration.

The election watchdog, Golos, a non-profit organisation founded in 2000 in defence of Russian voters' rights, verified more incidents of fraud in October's regional elections than in the corresponding round in March 2011, despite the installation of cameras in polling stations – another reform of 2012. In some cases, multiple cameras were strategically placed to view almost every part of the polling station, except the ballot boxes.

The same regressive logic can be seen in the second major 'liberalising' reform of 2012 – the revival of direct gubernatorial elections. This was also a reform that was likely to happen, given the general decline in the regime's legitimacy in the post-financial crisis period and the need to mitigate one of the drawbacks of a centralised authoritarian political system; that responsibility for failure travels up the chain of command.

This was evident during the devastating flood in Krymsk, in southern Russia's Krasnodar region on July 7, 2012, that killed more than 170. As the death toll climbed, so too did the trail of blame, with growing calls for long-standing Governor Alexander Tkachyov to step down. This could have been an uncomfortable moment for President Putin, had it not been for the fact that it was Medvedev who re-appointed Tkachev as governor back in March. Nonetheless, the reinstitution of direct governor elections represents a timely shift of responsibility from the head of state to the voter, in a period of intense scrutiny.

But like the party-system reform, this reform also has enough provisions to isolate unwanted opposition candidates and prevent their participation. The inclusion of so-called 'municipal filters', which oblige candidates to collect a percentage of signatures from deputies and municipal leaders in order to run for office, raise significant barriers to opposition candidates, and this was evident in October's governor elections when half the candidates (17 out of 34) failed to make it through the filters to take part in the elections. In central Russia's Ryzan region, 10 parties forwarded candidates but only 4 actually competed in the gubernatorial election. As a result, a region that was ripe for an upset saw unpopular incumbent, Oleg Kovalev, re-elected with 64 per cent of the vote.

From reform to repression: the opposition under pressure

Despite the regressive nature of these 'liberal' reforms, there are still reasons to claim that 'opposition politics' experienced some kind of revival in Russia in 2012. United Russia's poor result in the December 2011 State Duma election altered the balance of power in the lower chamber, meaning that the new Sixth Duma Convocation is likely to see a more constructive approach from the party of power towards the systemic opposition of A Just Russia, the Communists (CPRF) and Vladimir Zhirinovsky's Liberal Democrats (LDPR). More importantly, 2012 saw some positive developments on the part of the non-systemic opposition that gave general grounds for optimism.

A good example can be seen in the resurrection of Vladimir Ryzhkov's Republican Party. Both the party and its leader are survivors of the Yeltsin period, but Ryzhkov's opposition to Putin and subsequent fall from grace in the 2000s was accompanied by his exit from the political scene and the suspension of his party's registration. In May 2012, the Ministry of Justice, under pressure from the European Court of Human Rights re-registered the Republican Party, which then merged with other non-systemic opposition (the Boris Nemtsov/Mikhail Kasyanov 'For Russia without Lawlessness and Corruption' coalition) to form the Republican-PARNAS party. In October's municipal elections, the party managed to send one deputy to the Barnaul City Council in Western Siberia's Altai region, after gaining 5.4 per cent of the vote.

A no less significant development saw the formation of the opposition 'Coordination Council' (CC) in October 2012, uniting the variegated groupings that comprised the December protest movement. The CC was elected through an elaborate online procedure which included a pre-election period of debates and essay competitions in which candidates outlined the various ideologies on offer. By the close of voting on October 22, 81,000 voters had selected 45 CC leaders from a shortlist of a little over 200 opposition figures from left, nationalist and liberal groups.

Despite the relatively small number of online voters, the formation of the CC had great symbolic value, demonstrating that the opposition had made the transition from loose band of street protestors to the

next 'organised' stage of development. This election also dispelled the myth that the protest movement had little support beyond the capital – Muscovites comprising no more than 35 per cent of the total number of voters. But most of all, the formation of the CC generated a leader for the amorphous protest movement in the form of Alexei Navalny, the eventual winner of the CC election. This marked his personal transformation from 'anti-corruption blogger' to elected leader and legitimate political figure.

However, these successes, including the appearance of an opposition Coordination Council, have masked the gradual isolation and radicalisation of the non-systemic opposition throughout 2012. This has been a result of the regressive reforms already mentioned – those that effectively foreclosed constitutional avenues to challenge the regime – but also of the Kremlin's efforts at dividing the opposition. By the spring of 2012, the non-systemic opposition had become more isolated and more radical by the simple act of the systemic opposition staying away from the protests. Although difficult to substantiate, there is little doubt that the authorities moved quickly to prevent the systemic and non-systemic opposition from uniting, utilising their cosy relationship with Zyuganov and other 'system' opposition leaders.

As early as December 2011, shortly after the State Duma election, there were signs that the Communist Party (CPRF) leadership was not going to support the protest movement. An announcement by the Sverdlovsk branch of the CPRF on December 8, 2011, urged supporters to stay at home and not take part in demonstrations planned for Yekaterinburg on December 10, citing the possibility that the authorities would view them as illegal and administer fines. Sverdlovsk, it should be noted, as part of the Urals industrial heartland, is considered the backbone of Putin's support and large-scale protests here would have struck a serious blow to Putin and to the regime's legitimacy as a whole.

Elsewhere, representatives of the systemic opposition have mirrored the CPRF's position. While A Just Russia has struggled to control its members for much of the year, it has nonetheless discouraged contact between its supporters and the protest movement. Party leader, Sergei Mironov, reiterated the official line at the party's conference in October 2012, warning the party (un)faithful to stay off the streets and away from the 'sectarian' protest movement. The liberal- leaning Yabloko party likewise put considerable distance between itself and the protests, refusing to participate in September's 'March of Millions'. Although Yabloko justified this decision in terms of its unwillingness to associate with extremist left and right groups, by keeping their distance, the systemic opposition have deprived the non-systemic opposition of a moderating influence, as well as considerable support.

Perhaps a more significant contribution to isolating and radicalising the non-systemic opposition has come from the increasingly repressive approach adopted by the Putin administration since May 2012. This toughening stance was observed immediately after Putin's inauguration, and by late 2012 a succession of controversial laws had been passed, each more repressive than the last and each harder to justify in terms of the official Kremlin line of 'institutionalising' opposition politics.[5] In the summer of 2012, legislators beefed up existing laws regulating demonstrations and other 'mass actions', re-classified libel as a criminal offence and adopted a web 'blacklist' bill. These laws have immediate implications for the non-systemic opposition, who over the course of the last decade had been pushed to the streets and the virtual world of the internet as other political 'arenas' became inaccessible. Of all the repressive legislation passed in 2012, the poorly defined treason law signed by Putin in November is the most ominous, leaving little doubt that the regime is stocking its legal armoury in readiness for more political unrest.

What is interesting is that by the end of 2012, these new laws have yet to be used to make mass arrests of opponents. This suggests that, for the time being at least, rather than repress, the Putin administration is trying to intimidate with laws intended to shock opponents with their potential for use. Nonetheless, there have been arrests and targeted harassment of demonstrators. In addition to the high-profile two-year jail terms given to three band members of Pussy Riot in August 2012, the protests in Moscow on May 6 and 7, which saw over 400 arrests, continue to be the focus for retrospective punishment. By November 2012, 19 demonstrators involved in May's public order disturbances are facing criminal

5 See FIIA Comment 7/2012, 'The first 100 days of Putin's presidency see a tightening of the screws', August 9, 2012.

charges, with the authorities reportedly looking for up to 70 more. But the authorities' pursuit is rapidly degenerating into its own lawlessness. In October, the Russian security services allegedly kidnapped opposition activist Leonid Razvozzhaev in Ukraine and returned him to Russia as part of the on-going investigation into the May disturbances, while in November police raided the apartment of well-known intellectual and former Soviet dissident, Boris Kagarlitsky – a figure with a tenuous link to May's violence at best. Newly-elected CC leaders, Alexei Navalny and Sergei Udaltsov, are also facing serious criminal charges which could yet result in lengthy prison terms for both. Somewhat ironically, the subject of political prisoners was discussed during President Medvedev's meeting with representatives from the non-systemic opposition in February 2012, but little did they know there would be more by the end of the year.

It is clear that the protest movement and the non-systemic opposition have their fair share of radical views, irrespective of Kremlin intervention. The CC is home to a broad spectrum of ideologies, and fundamental divisions exist on issues such as privatisation, immigration, centre-periphery relations, the role of the state and foreign policy, among others. But by the time of the formation of the CC in October 2012, the discussion on how to reform the political system was making way for themes of lustration and punishing regime loyalists in any future post-Putin settlement. What is more, around a third of the CC elected leadership, including Alexei Navalny, support the view that the Council should neither negotiate with the authorities nor try to reach a compromise with them on important issues.[6] Whether the Kremlin is deliberately attempting to radicalise the protest movement is a different question, but there is no doubt that the belief in the reformability of the regime by constitutional means is diminishing.

In many ways, this hardening of attitudes is inevitable. After all, the belief that the system is 'reformable' is only sustainable if there are realistic means to achieve this end. This relates as much to the reforms that did not happen in 2012, but that are clearly needed to restore belief. Although registration requirements have been eased, parties are still barred from forming electoral blocs. This reform is essential if the various left, liberal and nationalist elements of the non-systemic opposition are to have any chance of success in the electoral process. Another missing reform relates to the way elections are administered. By late 2012, there had only been cosmetic reform of election commissions and Central Election Commission chair, Vladimir Churov, retains his position, despite repeated calls for his resignation following December's fraudulent Duma election.

Pressure building: no winners 12 months after the State Duma election

The fact that the non-systemic opposition finds itself under more pressure at the end of 2012 is self-evident: the regime offered no realistic outlet to challenge them and the increasingly hard line taken by the authorities is making life difficult for many activists. As such, the symbolic achievement of forming an opposition Coordination Council is just that – symbolic. After making the transition from street protestors to organised opposition, the next stage of development looks suspiciously like a reversion to protests. The first decree issued by the newly-formed CC was for fresh demonstrations in December. This is despite falling attendances throughout the second half of the year and the fact that the last 'March of Millions' on September 10, 2012 saw, at most, 15,000 demonstrators take to the streets.

As the protest movement was galvanised by the demand for 'free elections' and as the next scheduled elections are not until September 2013, it is unlikely that the intervening period will see significant mass actions with the numbers needed to push the regime into genuine reform, unless there is an unexpected impetus from a non-election-related source. In the meantime, the extent of ideological divisions within the CC makes the task of forming a coordinated set of policy alternatives practically impossible. Ultimately, the non-systemic opposition has seen its options all but reduced to broad sloganeering and Navalny-style anti-corruption messages interspersed with displays of civil disobedience – the same position it was in in December

6 Candidates in the CC election campaign completed a survey to determine their 'political compass', which included responses to the statement 'The Coordination Council should hold talks with the authorities and try to reach a compromise on as many issues as possible'.

2011, but without the focal point of a federal-level election.

That the regime is under more pressure twelve months later is less obvious. The reforms conducted in the early part of 2012 appear to strengthen the regime, while repression would seem to offer at least a modicum of short-term relief. But, in reality, the unwillingness or inability to compromise and draw the non-systemic opposition into the system is undermining at least two pillars of regime stability.

First, the systemic opposition has experienced significant problems over the past 12 months and much of this derives from the fact that their leaders are under orders to prevent their members from uniting with the 'genuine' non-systemic opposition. Although easy to overlook when assessing regime stability, the Putin administration's current problems will multiply considerably if loyal opposition cease to be loyal, and this outcome is more likely now that at the same time last year. For the CPRF, calls for Zyuganov to step down as leader intensified after he failed to gain more votes in the March presidential election than the party gained in the December parliamentary election. But in truth, Zyuganov is under fire from elements within the party who want to see more protest and less acquiescence to the regime. Based on the party's programmatic material, the CPRF is more anti-regime than many groupings within the non-systemic opposition. The party's cordial relationship with the authorities is largely a function of Zyuganov's continuing leadership, but by the time of the party's conference in October 2012, calls to replace the party's first and only post-Soviet leader were growing louder.

The situation within A Just Russia also reveals the centrifugal tendencies generated by December's protests and by the regime's unwillingness to compromise. In September 2012, the State Duma took the unprecedented decision to strip A Just Russia deputy, Gennadi Gudkov, of his mandate. Gennadi Gudkov, along with his son, Dmitri Gudkov, and Ilya Ponomarev form a trio of vocal and visible Duma deputies who chose to actively participate in the protest movement against the wishes of the party leadership. At the same time, and indicative of the divisions within the party, a group of deputies under the leadership of Alexei Mitrofanov are attempting to change the parliament's regulations to form an independent faction. By November 2012, this group, which is likely to support United Russia, had grown to eight deputies.

The second pillar of the regime shaken by the events of the past year is the balance between liberal and conservative elements within the pro-power elite that has formed the basis of regime stability for much of the past decade. By refusing to make constructive reforms and by employing an increasingly repressive approach, the Putin administration has tipped the balance against the sizable liberal-leaning minority within the regime who view Russia's future strength and prosperity as being tied to political modernisation.

A clear example can be seen in the decline of Dmitri Medvedev as a political figure in 2012. At the end of 2011, Medvedev was the main representative of the pro-reform, pro-regime liberals, the junior half of the tandem, but one of only two Russian politicians capable of commanding a respectable approval rating in the political system. But 12 months later, his authority has seriously diminished. Aside from seeing many of his reforms undone in the past year and receiving a humiliating assessment of his role in the Russo-Georgian war of 2008, his institutional position is now the subject of doubt, as rumours circulate that his government is about to be dismissed.[7] In October, a report from the Moscow-based Centre for Strategic Development identified Dmitri Rogozin and Alexei Kudrin as two possible replacements for Medvedev. The existence of this speculation and the suggestion of two replacements with diametrically opposing ideologies (Rogozin, as a left-wing nationalist and Kudrin, as a free market advocate) reflect the general level of regime instability.

Ultimately, the Putin administration's attempt to restore its authority at all costs is affecting the entire pro-power elite. By punishing Gennadi Gudkov for his involvement in the protest movement and expelling him from the Duma on the grounds of mixing business and legislative work, the regime has created a great deal of consternation that this

7 In a documentary on the Russo-Georgian war screened on August 8, 2012, several high-ranking military officers criticised Medvedev for his indecision at the start of the conflict. Owing to the nature of media control in Russia and the sensitivity of the subject matter, it is inconceivable that this programme could have been aired without Putin's approval.

process could now be used to purge all Duma factions. A cursory glance at the Forbes rich list leaves little doubt that many deputies are actively running businesses, mostly from the United Russia faction. If investigating the economic links of parliamentarians is taken to its logical conclusion, then the ranks of United Russia could look a little thinner and the lower chamber a little emptier. By the end of October 2012, United Russia had already lost one deputy to this process. Again, the existence of speculation surrounding a possible dissolution of parliament adds to the prevailing instability.

By late 2012, the pressure within the political system is building. The regime's attempt to isolate the non-systemic opposition is leaving a growing number of Russians feeling disenfranchised with no outlet to vent their frustrations. Moreover, the use of repression is a high-risk approach that quickly reduces politics to a zero-sum game; for street activists and regime insiders alike. The implication is that unless the Putin administration can change its current course and come to view political opposition as an opportunity to evolve the political system and release pent-up pressure – rather than a threat to be combated – this pressure will inevitably find an outlet. In the meantime, the EU should take into account the risk of a downward spiral of radicalisation and repression in Russia in the short to medium term, as well as the threat that this pressured political system poses to stability.

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