

Putin in the Kremlin: a pompous return, a vague perspective

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7 May saw the ceremonial swearing-in of Vladimir Putin as President of Russia. He began his term in office by signing a series of decrees concerning the most important spheres; these were populist in content, but were mainly intended to demonstrate that he has prepared a strategy for development. Putin also nominated Dmitri Medvedev to the post of Prime Minister, whose candidacy was accepted by the State Duma on 8 May.

Putin has returned with a vision of the state which draws on the policies of his second term in office (2004-2008): a state which demonstrates imperial ambitions in the international arena and domestically takes care of the poorer groups of citizens, with an economy dominated by the state sector. He has also recreated the president-prime minister relation which existed during his previous presidency, when the head of government was burdened with the responsibility for any problems. However, Vladimir Putin's unchanged vision of the state contrasts with the major social changes that have occurred in Russia in recent years. Public support for the model of development which Putin offers has fallen significantly, particularly from the opinion-makers, and the demand for liberal reform has visibly increased. The government's unwillingness to launch these reforms and make concessions to its opponents, as well as its attempts to put pressure on the discontented, will intensify the risk of tension between the government and society, and increase the likelihood of further outbreaks of discontent.

The oath-taking and the first acts

Vladimir Putin's official return was accompanied by an imposing and carefully orchestrated swearing-in ceremony: the centre of Moscow was closed to traffic, and state television showed the Putin's passage from government headquarters to the Kremlin, as well as the oath-taking ceremony, which was held in the most prestigious hall of the Kremlin, the Andreyevsky.

Vladimir Putin swiftly and vigorously proceeded to exert his authority. In the first hours after being sworn in, he signed several decrees concerning the most important areas – domestic and foreign policy, the economy, social affairs, and the military. The content of these decrees is mostly populist (he ordered the government to raise salaries by 50% by 2018; to reduce the prices of accommodation by 20%; to increase life expectancy to 74 years, etc.) or vague (for example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is supposed to conduct a foreign policy

of protecting Russia's national interests, based on the principles of pragmatism, openness and multilateralism). The publication of 12 decrees shortly after Putin took office was intended to show that he has returned ready with a strategy for developing the country.

On 7 May, Putin also nominated Dmitri Medvedev as Prime Minister, whose candidacy was adopted the next day by the State Duma (by the majority of votes from United Russia and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia). Within a week, the prime minister is to present the composition of the government. As we might expect, Vladimir Putin will have a decisive influence on the cabinet, due both to his formal constitutional powers, and to his great informal influence on personnel decisions covering the whole administration.

Inauguration in the shadow of protests

The inauguration of Vladimir Putin was overshadowed by protests, which began on 6 May in Moscow with the so-called 'March of Millions', a legal demonstration by the opposition, which was attended by between 15,000 and 20,000 people. The march ended in clashes between the protesters and the police, as well as mass arrests; 650 people were detained. Smaller actions by the opposition, which were accompanied by numerous arrests, continued in the centre of Moscow over the next few days. The rather violent course of these demonstrations confirms that the initiative in organising protests in Russia is increasingly being taken by groups of radical activists, who are expressing their frustration at the lack of dialogue with the government and are ready to act outside the law. On the other hand, the police's attitude shows that the government is determined to pacify any signs of discontent by force, and to take action designed to intimidate active opponents (apart from the arrests and beatings, many of the protesters who were of conscription age got the call-up into the army).

Putin the unchanging

Vladimir Putin's return to the Kremlin brings to an end the period of government in tandem, under which Putin retained the informal leadership of the elite, even though Dmitri Medvedev technically held the highest office of state. Putin is returning with a vision of the state which draws on the policies of his second presidential term (2004-2008): a state which demonstrates imperial ambitions on the international stage: to continue the integration initiatives in the post-Soviet area (including the construction of the Eurasian Economic Union); aim to create a single economic and humanitarian area with Europe; develop a strategic partnership with China and a 'relationship of equals' with the United States. On the domestic front, this is a vision of the welfare state for the poorer groups of citizens, in which the state sector should still function as a stimulus for modernisation. One novelty in the economic decree is the announcement that state enterprises in sectors outside raw materials and defence will be privatised, even though this will not be equal to removing the

state's domination of the economy.

Putin is also returning to the model of the 2000-8 period in his relations with the government: proclaiming populist social projects (such as those contained in the decrees of 7 May), and apportioning any responsibility for their failure to the cabinet. In light of the announcement that a further wave of economic crisis is coming, Medvedev's government could play the role of a 'buffer', taking the responsibility for possible economic and social problems.

Vladimir Putin's past actions and speeches indicate that he has no plans to reform the model of the state in a more liberal direction, as those of the government's opponents who have a deeper interest in modernisation have been demanding. The government's response to such demands is a negative strategy – try to mute the discontent, and to take preventative measures: putting pressure on the opposition, promoting splits among them, and preventing any political consolidation. This is illustrated both by the action taken against the street protests and the media sympathetic to the opposition (there have been many hacker attacks on their websites), and by the 'sterilisation' of the democratic laws passed at the end of Medvedev's presidency in response to public protests (especially the law re-establishing the direct election of governors). In its social strategy, the government is betting on a strategy of playing down the scale of discontent, and on arranging demonstrations of support for the government from the 'healthy' parts of society – the workers and trade unions, the so-called patriotic circles (who are in reality nationalist-chauvinist groups), and the Orthodox Church. In addition, the government has sent various signals to the public which prove its will to maintain the system: for example, officials who in the public eye embody electoral and media manipulation (such as the head of the Central Election Commission Vladimir Churov, deputy prime minister Vladislav Surkov, and the director of NTV television Vladimir Kulistikov) have been awarded with state decorations.

A difficult term of office ahead

The continuation of an unchanged economic and social policy means that Russia's main problems – declining competitiveness on international markets, systemic corruption, a poor investment climate and business environment, weak state institutions – will remain unresolved. These problems will probably be increased by periodic economic crises, during which the state may have difficulty with meeting its extensive social obligations, and thus with maintaining the loyalty of those groups that now constitute the social base of Putin's regime. Any further problems, especially economic, will therefore impact on Putin's position as a leader whose political legitimacy has already been weakened in the reception of the most active groups of Russian society.