

Putin's pre-election offensive

Jadwiga Rogoża

In recent weeks there has been a noticeable rise in Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's public profile: he has given a number of policy speeches, on the one hand containing populist social declarations and visions of a "strong state", and on the other promoting modernisation. In this way Putin is trying to bring about a specific kind of 'rebranding': while maintaining his image of a strong leader who cares for society, he simultaneously wants to show that he well understands the new challenges facing today's Russia and the need for the country to modernise. However, this change in his rhetoric is not accompanied by any new programme of action, which would take into account the opinions of those groups in Russian society which are interested in modernising the state. Putin's declarations are rather actions of spin, aimed at promoting United Russia, the party he leads, before December's elections, in the face of falling support for it. However, above all Putin is seeking to demonstrate that he is the leader of the ruling elite and the country's main decision-maker, including on the succession of power at the Kremlin.

Putin the authoritarian moderniser

In recent weeks, Vladimir Putin's media exposure has clearly increased; he has also made several important political statements. On 20 April, the Russian Prime Minister presented his annual report to the State Duma; he used this occasion as an excuse to present his government's successes in combating the consequences of the economic crisis, as well as to make triumphant predictions on the development of the Russian economy (after '10 years of stable and peaceful development', he said, Russia will be one of the world's five largest economies). Putin also presented his vision for the country – strong, resistant to outside interference and not beholden to any 'unjustified liberalism'. In turn, on 6 May at the regional conference of the 'party of power' United Russia (which he leads), Putin presented his idea to establish an electoral platform called the All-Russian National Front, in advance of December's parliamentary elections. It is to be based on United Russia, but it is also intended to include representatives of social organisations and trade unions.

At the same time, Putin has undertaken several actions – publicised in the media – which indicate that he understands the need to modernise the country, and has already made plans in this area. On 6 May, Putin announced the establishment of a government agency for strategic initiatives, which is intended to deal with liberalising the legislation concerning entrepreneurs and offer support to young professionals. On his initiative, works are supposed to be resumed on the government's 'Strategy 2020', describing a vision for

Russia's economic development (this strategy had already been initiated during Putin's presidency in 2008); well-known liberal economists such as Vladimir Mau and Yaroslav Kuzminov are participating in the further development of the strategy .

An analysis of Putin's activity shows that he is working to modify his image: while maintaining the traditionalist and pro-social elements of his public persona, he is trying to simultaneously extend it with modernising aspects, thereby encroaching on the territory which until recently was regarded as the domain of President Medvedev and his associates. Putin's declarations should be seen as a kind of spin, which are not backed up by any coherent programme that would illustrate the needs of those groups in Russian society which are interested in the real modernisation of the state.

The pre-election context

Putin's increased public profile should be seen in the context of the run-up to the elections; and he may be seeking to achieve several political objectives at the same time.

The immediate aim of Putin's initiatives is to win support for United Russia before December's parliamentary elections. Although the dominance of Putin's ruling elite over the political scene remains unchallenged (with United Russia remaining the dominant party), the political party scene has changed, in comparison with four years ago when the previous elections took place. The gradual drop in public support for the 'party of power' is visible in the polls (from 62% in April 2009 to 55% in April 2011, according to the Levada Centre), and was even more marked in March's regional elections, in which United Russia's results fluctuated between 40 and 50%. A feeling of fatigue among the Russian public is growing at the domination of one group and the lack of any real political competition. There are also more and more people who are active, educated and prosperous, for whom United Russia is an anachronistic group which cannot offer any attractive programme, even at the level of its public declarations. Against this background, a clear mobilisation of opponents to United Russia has been apparent for some time, both within the ranks of the 'licensed' opposition in the parliament, as well as the democratic opposition, and among part of the general public. They are aware of the fact that the official electoral process does not allow them to win against the 'party of power', so they are focused on mobilising voters against it (the opposition has made joint appeals for people to vote for any other party than United Russia), or attempts to discredit it ('United Russia – the party of swindlers and thieves', a slogan coined by Aleksei Navalny, a popular blogger who fights corruption, has become a buzzword in the Internet). Even well-known figures from Russian show-business have snubbed the party – the same one to which they flocked several years ago.

Despite a certain change in mood, though, the dominance of United Russia is not under threat. With the full support of the government, which strictly controls the electoral process, the party's victory in the upcoming elections is a certainty, and no opposition group (either among the parliamentary opposition or among democratic opposition that remains outside the parliament) can compete with the 'party of power'. However, the government's electoral priority – to maintain a constitutional majority in the State Duma, which will give the elite full control over the legislative process – requires a convincing victory for United Russia. The government will thus employ all the available instruments of control over the electoral

system to improve its ratings: for example by weakening its parliamentary rivals (including the Just Russia party), not allowing the extra-parliamentary opposition to participate in the election, and taking action to improve United Russia's image. One manifestation of this 'rebranding' is Vladimir Putin's idea to establish an All-Russian National Front, an electoral platform based on United Russia, which is intended to attract new people to the party and mobilise its core voters.

Putin's public activity, aimed at confirming his status as 'leader of all the Russians', also seems relevant to the upcoming presidential elections in March 2012. The chances that Putin will run in this election, are rather high, considering the interests of the ruling elite which Putin leads and guards, and the possibility of its legitimate return to the Kremlin. However, the rise within Russia of intellectual & business elites and social groups concerned with modernising the country's system seem to have pushed Putin into this 'rebranding', and to make a public presentation of the arguments for his continued leadership. Putin's publicity offensive may in fact be the beginning of his own presidential campaign. However, even if the ruling class choose another electoral solution (such as Dmitri Medvedev's re-election), the intensive promotion of Putin's image is intended to maintain the *status quo*, i.e. his role as the realleader of the elite (Putin took similar actions in 2007, prior to his departure from the Kremlin). And although no announcement as to which member of the elite will run for president can be expected before this autumn, Vladimir Putin is now already clearly aiming to show that he is the main decider regarding the succession of power.