

The Kremlin's new political project

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Recent months have seen a series of events which have tarnished the 'party of power' United Russia's reputation and deepened the erosion in its ranks. The party is coming under constant criticism from the opposition, and has become the unwilling 'hero' of successive corruption scandals; it has attracted public odium by passing controversial legislation, and is showing signs of internal splits. There are also compromising reports concerning United Russia, which may be seen as leaks by part of the ruling elite; one example is a report by the Governance and Problem Analysis Centre (a think-tank associated with the conservative wing of Putin's elite), which stated that the parliamentary elections of December 2011 were rigged in favour of United Russia, while the real winners were the Communists.

The Kremlin's reaction to the events surrounding United Russia indicates that the presidential team is beginning to distance itself from the discredited party, and is aiming to restructure its political base. There are many indications that the role of the main political platform could be taken by the All-Russia People's Front – a social coalition gathering 'ordinary' people in the regions, which exploits social and traditionalist rhetoric. The Kremlin has also initiated a change in the electoral law which is intended to mitigate the decline in the pro-Kremlin forces' poll ratings. This has been accompanied by a propaganda campaign aimed at the conservative and anti-Western segment of Russian society, which is becoming a mainstay in Putin's conflict with socially active groups and the discontented part of the ruling elite. The Kremlin's actions should be seen as an attempt to stem the loss of legitimacy which is spreading over the entire ruling team. However, betting on a 'conservative clean-up' may lead to deepening conflict with that part of the ruling elite who will inevitably fall prey to this new tactic.

United Russia as ballast

On 12 March, the media publicised a report by the Governance and Problem Analysis Centre that suggests the parliamentary elections were rigged in favour of United Russia, which is formally headed by Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev. According to the think-tank, the results of the 'party of power' were 'corrected' by almost double, and it was in fact the Communist Party which was the real winner of the elections. It is significant that so severe a criticism of the 'party of power' has come from an institution known for its conservative ideological line and close ties with the Kremlin: it is associated with Vladimir Yakunin, the head of Russian Railways, who belongs to Vladimir Putin's inner circle, and is known as 'the Orthodox Chekist'. The publication of this report may be considered a controlled leak, and a signal

that the conservative part of the elite is increasingly distancing itself from United Russia as the authorities' main political platform. The overtone of the report is not favourable to Vladimir Putin personally, as it accuses the government of having committed electoral fraud; on the other hand, it fits perfectly with Putin's ongoing preparations for the reconstruction of his political base, as Putin has been distancing himself from the party since 2011.

United Russia is currently regarded as the weakest part of this base; since the elections, it has become the subject of repeated scandals (for example, the media have revealed the undeclared assets belonging to some of its deputies), and is the focus of public odium for the controversial bills adopted in parliament. Divisions within the party have also come to light; in one instance, over 50 deputies in the Krasnoyarsk branch accused the party of corrupt practices and resigned their memberships. Support for the party has shown a clear downward trend (the FOM survey in March gives it 39%); and the opposition slogan of 'the party of crooks and thieves' has stuck to them (40% of respondents to a Levada Centre poll in February agreed with this opinion). Despite the fact that United Russia is a loyal tool of the Kremlin (the acts it passes in parliament are mostly drawn up in the Kremlin), the presidential team sees it as extra ballast for Putin, who himself is struggling with declining legitimacy and growing dissatisfaction among both the elite and the general public.

The Kremlin reaches for 'ordinary people'

The Kremlin's idea for a 'new quality' in politics boils down to relying on the conservative and the less well-off, who have become Putin's main social base, in the light of his conflict with the middle class and some of the ruling elite. Instead of the discredited United Russia, the Kremlin's new political platform could turn out to be the All-Russia People's Front, a social coalition mainly composed of employees of large Russian companies and factories, which was formed by Putin before the last presidential election. The Front is presented as an embodiment of 'ordinary' Russians and patriotic forces. A symbol of the social advancement which these groups are enjoying is Igor Kholmanskikh, an engineer from a tank factory in Nizhny Tagil, who became famous during Putin's live teleconference in late 2011, at the peak of the anti-Putin protests. Surrounded by a group of factory workers, Kholmanskikh assured Putin that they were ready to come to Moscow and "stand up for stability". Shortly after being sworn in, President Putin appointed Kholmanskikh as his envoy for the Ural Federal District. This example shows that in constructing this new political platform, Putin will place his trust in new people who are not entangled in the existing relations in Moscow, and who are personally indebted to him for their promotion.

A convention of the Front is planned for this June, which Vladimir Putin will attend; he is to present a program of activities for the Front, including its reorganisation. As might be expected, the Front will take over the bottom-tier structure and members of United Russia, ostentatiously removing the most discredited members of the party. Such a process can be observed even now; representatives of United Russia are being pushed out of the Front's regional structures, while promotions are being given to the non-party heads of Putin's public panels who have been leading active campaigns criticising the regional authorities and calling for pro-social policies to be introduced.

This process of building a political base on the National Front is part of Vladimir Putin's campaign addressed to the conservative and anti-Western segment of Russian society. As part of this process, the Kremlin has initiated anti-Western campaigns (including a campaign to 'protect Russian children' from adoptions in the US), penalised 'immoral conduct' (including the statutory introduction of fines for 'promoting homosexuality'), is reinforcing patriotic attitudes (the anniversary of the Battle of Stalingrad was celebrated with much pomp), and strengthening relations with the Russian Orthodox Church, which is presented as a centre of moral renewal.

The preparations for changes to the electoral law should also be seen as a response to the erosion of the pro-Kremlin political base. On 1 March, President Putin submitted a draft law to the State Duma providing for the restoration before the next parliamentary elections of a mixed electoral system (half of the MPs are to be elected in single-mandate constituencies). The current proportional representation was introduced before the 2007 elections, which allowed the then popular United Russia to win a constitutional majority in the parliament.

Challenges to the Kremlin's 'clean-up'

The Kremlin has initiated the 'clean-up' in search of an antidote to the ongoing loss of legitimacy of the entire ruling elite. Vladimir Putin and his milieu decided on this reorientation of policy and the political reconstruction of its base straight after the elections, in order to give themselves a few years for preparations before the next parliamentary (2016) and presidential (2018) elections.

But the imperative of the 'clean-up' poses new challenges to the president. On one hand, this process will require marginalising some of the current elite and putting the blame for the existing problems on them. Such action could further antagonise the ruling camp, who have already been demoralised by Putin's strict policy against both United Russia and some of his own supporters. In addition, the process of building up the new base of support could prove to be a source of new challenges. The Kremlin's strategy is based on social groups which hitherto have been characterised by inertia; these people do not have much experience of political activity, and are unused to independent, grassroots activities, which will make it necessary to 'manually steer' the entire process. In light of the system's declining efficiency and weakening socio-political stability (including the rise of public discontent at the poor social situation), the long-term effectiveness of this project may prove to be limited.