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Putin Considers His Options

The holiday break over, Russia resumed its tumultuous season of presidential politics this week with Vladimir Putin facing two difficult challenges before he can return to the Kremlin. First, how can he manufacture a first round victory in presidential elections on March 4, despite his declining poll rating (generally believed to be below the 50 percent needed to avoid a runoff) and widespread popular cynicism. Second, if the voting does go to a second round, how can Putin ensure that he wins without conveying the impression, either to the political opposition or to other members of the elite, that he is weakened and thus politically vulnerable. So far, Kremlin spin doctors have offered only a repackaged, superficially more flexible Putin who shows little sign of genuinely trying to open up the authoritarian system he created.

In an essay posted on his website January 16 and published the same day in *Izvestiya*, Putin said only he can guide Russia between the twin threats of instability and stagnation. He criticized the “urge for revolution” as a “constantly recurring problem in Russian history.” Putin said nothing about the vote fraud that brought protestors into the streets after the Duma elections last month. He also emphasized the Russia’s growing prosperity and said he sought to stimulate the growth of a middle class, democracy and civil society. These latter remarks appeared intended to woo the disgruntled December protestors, but they were an about face from Putin’s record over the past 12 years, which was noted for the crushing of independent civil society. Only a few weeks ago he ridiculed the protestors, comparing the white ribbons they wore to condoms.

In other areas there also has been much talk, but few significant steps, about opening up the system. Putin said on Wednesday he was ready for a dialogue with the protestors (though he questioned their willingness to talk). President Medvedev, now the lamest of lame ducks, has called for the easing of restrictions against political parties. This week the Kremlin introduced a bill that would reinstate the direct election of governors, though only after “consultations with the president.” More telling of the Kremlin’s true intentions has been the dismissal of several governors since the Duma elections apparently for failing to deliver enough votes for the ruling United Russia party in December.

Two longtime Putin allies with somewhat independent reputations, oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov and former Finance Minister Aleksey Kudrin, have fluttered about the political beau monde in recent weeks, apparently to show the system's new responsiveness. But to little effect. Prokhorov, whose vast fortune is largely dependent on Putin's continued good will, has criticized the authorities and said he wants to run for President (though polls show him with less than 5 percent support). His electoral fate will be decided before the end of the week. Kudrin's attempt to broker talks between the opposition and the authorities broke down, in his words, due to "hardliners on both sides." The activities of both men are probably intended to attract and channel dissatisfied voters.

Although Putin told the press this week that he hoped to continue working with the United States after he returned to the Kremlin, U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul, who arrived in Moscow only on January 14, bumped into the Kremlin's resistance to democratic change in his first few days on the job. A day after McFaul met with human rights activists in his first official meeting at the U.S Embassy, Russian state television lashed out at him, questioned his credentials and suggested his agenda is to promote revolution. In a separate comment clearly directed at the United States, Putin himself criticized foreign states who seek to export democracy. Through much of the period of the so-called reset of relations with Russia the Obama Administration has sought to mitigate the tension between engagement on economic and security issues, on the one hand, and democracy and human rights, on the other. The attacks on McFaul this week suggest that such balancing will be much more difficult in what promises to be a rocky road ahead for bilateral relations.

Despite this post-election turbulence, the Kremlin probably will be able to engineer a first round victory for Putin on March 4. How much actual power he actually wields, however, will depend on how he manages events in the weeks leading up to the balloting. Growing protests or an election forcing Putin into a second round, as *The Economist* reminds us this week, could lead Russia's elites to wonder if their power and money might be more secure under another leader.