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### **Duma Election Crisis: The Kremlin Pushes Back**

Caught by surprise by the extent of public outrage at its falsification of the Duma election results on December 4, the Kremlin has moved rapidly to get ahead of events in the past few days. It has tried to take the steam out of the protest movement, punish those responsible for the botched parliamentary campaigns, and continue with plans for the return of Vladimir Putin to the Russian presidency next March.

The Kremlin cracked down harshly on protests immediately after the voting, but allowed a huge protest in Moscow last Saturday without arrests and even gave the actions some television coverage. Officials publicly cited the demonstrations as evidence of the openness of the Russian political system, but have rejected participants' demands for new elections. President Medvedev said on his Facebook page on December 11 that he had ordered an inquiry into the alleged voting fraud, but said it was not widespread enough to significantly affect the outcome significantly. Medvedev's posting, which did not mention protestors' calls for an end to Putin's rule, attracted more than 8,000 critical and often insulting comments in only six hours, an indicator of the depth of public anger and the collapsing political fortunes of the Russian president.

Personnel shakeups have followed as well. Longtime Russian Speaker Boris Gryzlov, the highest ranking leader of the United Russia after Putin (who is the party's leader but not a member), announced on December 14 that he would resign as Duma Speaker, a decision appeared was designed to cool public anger over the electoral falsification. Gryzlov has long been a symbol of the political symbol of the Putin era, and his departure probably also reflects an effort by Putin to put distance between himself and the party. Oligarch Alisher Usmanov, owner of the Kommersant publishing empire, fired two leading journalists from his Kommersant-Vlast magazine after they published photographs with offensive remarks targeting Putin. Vologda governor Pozgalev, meanwhile, was forced to resign. Medvedev warned after the Duma elections that measures would be taken against those governors who did not deliver enough votes for the ruling United Russia party.

In a suspiciously timely move, flamboyant Mikhail Prokhorov, one of Russia's richest oligarchs, international playboy, and owner of the New Jersey Nets basketball team, announced on December 12 that he will challenge Putin in the presidential elections (In a clever bit of branding, the RIA Novosti news agency circulated worldwide a photo of Prokhorov standing in front of a glittering neon sign with the word "Amerika.") Prokhorov denied that he had discussed his decision in advance with Putin or Medvedev, but his comments were in sync with the statements of Kremlin strategist Vladislav Surkov last week that there was a need for a party (and presumably presidential candidates) that would soak up the votes of disgruntled urbanites. State television, which typically gives little coverage to opposition figures, led its evening newscast with Prokhorov's announcement. He also may purchase Usmanov's publishing house, according to press reports, a deal that would not be possible without official approval. Prokhorov is little threat in any event to Putin, despite public anger over corruption, the economy and the growing perception that Putin is out of touch (One expert this week said Prokhorov is no more comfortable in politics than "a skunk in a ballet.") But Putin will be able to use the oligarch's bid to show that the presidential contest, which will no doubt be engineered to show Putin winning impressively, was genuinely competitive.

Putin, meanwhile, seem intent on convincing voters that he has heard their concerns even as he does little to fundamentally change the system. His choreographed, annual, live call-in show, scheduled for December 15, affords him the chance to make his first comments on last Saturday's rally. Authorities have given permission for another demonstration, expected to draw 50,000 people, to be held December 24. But even after he wins another presidential term the long term prospects for Putin's political future are increasingly uncertain. It is a telling indicator of trouble ahead – and the system's inflexibility -- that the election dispute of the past two weeks, which would be manageable in many other countries, has so quickly spiraled into a major crisis.