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Russia

Putin or chaos

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Following the strong comeback of Vladimir Putin in the presidential election held on March 4, 2012, Ilya BoudraĀtskis, member of the Socialist Movement of Russia (RSD) looks back at the movement of protest against the regime which developed in Russia in recent months, and analyses the reasons for the crushing success of Putin and the perspectives for the country and for the Left.

Aykut Kiliĉ – The result of the presidential election confirmed what we could clearly expect: Vladimir Putin has regained the power he temporarily delegated to Dmitri Medvedev in 2008. It seems however that the massive movement of contestation which broke out in December, just after the elections to the State Duma, continues. Who are the protesters? What are they demanding? What are the political forces active in this movement?

Ilya BoudraĀtskis – After Vladimir Putin was elected president in the first round on March 4, the massive movement which had arisen and which reached its highest degree of mobilization in December found itself in a complicated situation. It had concentrated exclusively on the question of the elections. The slogan “For honest elections” constituted a call to the most varied forces, from the far Right to the radical Left, to unite in order to organize common actions. This slogan also led to demands being reduced to just one: free and unrigged elections. Its promoters were persuaded that “honest” elections would inevitably lead to the defeat of Vladimir Putin, who had supposedly lost any electoral support, even passive, and was holding on to power only thanks to the machinations of the bureaucratic apparatus.

The question of the elections brought together hundreds of thousands of people because it was directly related to the question of the political future of the regime. When you asked the participants about the reasons for their presence in the meetings of the December 10 and 24, the most common replies answers were “We’ve had enough of all that!” and “We’re fed up with Putin”. This “intermediate state” in which society found itself made it necessary to define the programmatic demands of the movement. In this way the movement could have broadened its social base and appeared as a real alternative in the eyes of the overwhelming majority of people, who are always very passive on political questions.

However, the leaders of the opposition saw things differently. These liberal politicians, coordinators of the committee “For honest elections”, who organized the meetings and monopolized the space that was thus opened up, concentrated on the question of the transparency of the elections and the so-called “political reform”, namely, the modification of the antidemocratic law “On political parties”. They consciously kept off the agenda of the meetings any demands of a social nature.

Consequently, the movement which had brought together thousands of people on December 10 and had shaken not only the capital but also almost all of the big cities in the country found itself confined to Moscow and, to a lesser extent, to St. Petersburg, leaving the field free to the pro-Putin agitators in the provinces. On December 24, AlexeĀ Kudrin made an unexpected appearance on the platform of the meeting in Moscow. This politician occupied the post of Minister of Finances for 11 years, before resigning because of a scandal scarcely a few months ago. He is regarded as one of the principal neoliberal strategists of the Russian elite and he took everyone by surprise by expressing his solidarity with the movement and proposing his services as an intermediary to negotiate political reform with Putin.

The right-wing populist MikhaĀl Prokhorov, one of the richest men in the country and the 58th richest in the world,

with a personal fortune of 13.2 billion dollars, also tried to present himself as being the candidate of the movement for this election, not without success. Although the social composition of the meetings in Moscow was very varied, from the more or less well-off “middle-class” to poor public-sector workers, the pro-government media managed to present him as the “superhero” of wealthy Muscovites who were completely indifferent to the miserable situation of the vast majority of the inhabitants of the country.

The meetings that were staged in support for Vladimir Putin (known today by the name of “Putings”) also largely contributed to this polarization. In front of thousands of public sector workers mobilized under duress – there were 180,000 of them at the meeting on February 23 – employers and factory managers spoke in the name of the workers and called on people to support stability and a dignified life by voting for Putin. The media and liberal politicians in their turn described the participants in these meetings as losers, opposed to “the best people in the country” represented according to them by the participants in the actions of the opposition.

Anti-Putin sentiment was very widespread during the actions in February. Was there a substantial difference between February and December, a month during which the contestation related to the corrupt and repressive character of the regime and demanded change, though in an ambiguous manner?

In February, the contestation was almost exclusively in the big cities and concentrated on the electoral campaign. Its leaders were of course counting on massive fraud by Vladimir Putin’s campaign, aimed at guaranteeing him a victory in the first round. In their minds, exposing ballot-rigging would give a fresh impetus to the movement and lead to the recognition of the illegitimate character of the presidential election. Because of this, the movement did not evolve towards more complete political demands and confined itself to the slogan “For honest elections” that had already been heard in December. Within the opposition technical questions took the place of a political approach, while in every one of his public appearances,

Putin presented himself as a leader who had a concrete answer to every important question, from reform of pensions to foreign policy.

In February also, tens of thousands of activists expecting massive fraud were registered as voluntary observers for the March 4 election. They regarded their presence in the polling stations as their principal personal contribution to the struggle and the election itself as a kind of D-day which would mark a rupture. There were five or six independent observers in every one of the several thousand polling stations in Moscow. Even according to the independent estimates of the activists belonging to the networks of observers, few cases of vote-rigging were witnessed, and Vladimir Putin won 45 per cent of the votes. Although the fraud was on average more massive over the whole country, it is obvious that Putin won more votes than any other candidate. On March 5, the day after the elections, approximately 20,000 people went to a protest action organized in Moscow, which represents a very clear decrease if we consider the mobilizations in December and even those in February. The interventions of the speakers, calling on people not to recognize the results of the election and not to consider Putin as the legitimate President, were even more disappointing.

The other political forces who took to the streets just before the elections were Putin’s supporters and the nationalists. With the exception of the bourgeoisie and the “parasitic bureaucracy”, to use the terms employed by socialists in Russia, in what sectors was support for Vladimir Putin to be found? What are the aspects of his policies which enabled him to gain this support?

It is safe to say that the massive vote in favour of Vladimir Putin was to a large extent the consequence of the political failure of the opposition, as expressed by the complete absence of social demands, by the conscious refusal to confront the real differences of opinion among the participants in the organising committee of the opposition and, finally, by the absence of a real programme of political and social transformation capable of bringing down the Putin system. For the majority of the population, choosing between Putin and his opponents amounted to choosing

between stability and a dubious future, undoubtedly worse than the present. State television contributed greatly to create this feeling. The governmental channel has almost no influence in Moscow and St. Petersburg, where many people do not watch television and get their information from the Internet, but it is very influential in the provinces. The negative image of a whole series of liberal leaders also played an important role: characters like Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Ryzhkov are regarded as “people of the 1990s”, those political figures who were at the centre of things under Yeltsin and who took an active part in the “shock therapy” kind of reforms.

But in a more general manner, the success of Putin among the most oppressed and poorest layers is explained by the dilapidation, the disintegration even, of society after the restoration of capitalism. The absence of practical experience of self-organization, fear of the employers, permanent anxiety about the future, lack of confidence in any form of participation: these are so many characteristics of post-Soviet society which could be utilised in the context of the electoral mobilization in favour of Putin. The principal slogan of his campaign was “Me or chaos”; and this manner of presenting things incontestably weighed in his favour.

There are different nationalist groups in Russia, going from the moderates to the far Right. Some of them took part in the mobilizations. In Russia, all the bourgeois parties encourage a nationalist populism stamped with hatred against immigrants, starting with United Russia, Putin’s party. What differentiates these nationalist groups? Why do they take part in the contestation? What influence can they have on the movement?

From the beginning of the movement in December, the far Right was divided into two camps. The first, the “traditional”, rather anti-Western, Orthodox-Tsarist and fundamentalist current, decided not to take part in the movement and described its leaders as Zionists and foreign agents. The second, younger and dynamic, composed of groups such as “Russians”, “Russian Platform” and others, which defines itself as national-democratic, supported the movement. In their way of seeing things, “national-democracy” is defined as a state that is ethnically Russian, without minorities, particularly not Muslims or Caucasians. One of their principal slogans is “Let us stop feeding the Caucasus”: so they contest Putin’s dealings with the bloodthirsty Caucasian leaders, to whom he grants state subsidies, stealing money from the regions of the “native” Russians. These groups are supported by Alexei Navalny, one of the most popular figures of the movement, who defines himself as a moderate nationalist.

In fact all these groups are very visible but they constitute an insignificant minority of the movement. Now that the movement is going through a period of crisis and moving towards changes, it is extremely probable that the nationalists will detach themselves from it in order to play their own game. It seems that Dmitri Rogozin, the most celebrated nationalist leader, who is in the government and supported Putin passively during the campaign, is creating a new party, and doing so with a lot of money and good press coverage. And it is well-known that all the “national-democrats” are negotiating with him.

Can we speak of a movement of contestation in the provinces of Russia, more particularly in the factory-cities which experienced important workers’ struggles after the eruption of the crisis in 2008?

Indeed, after what was called the first wave of the economic crisis, at the end of 2008 and the beginning of 2009, thousands of workers in the factory-cities (or mono-towns, small towns where a large majority of the inhabitants work for the same big company) were victims of massive delays in payment of wages. But the protest movements of 2009 were quickly snuffed out thanks to enormous hand-outs to the big companies in the form of public money, intended to pay the wages that were due. Although none of the companies that failed to meet their obligation were nationalized, the policy followed by the government in this situation was perceived as the expression of the paternalist interest that the elites show to “ordinary people”.

Subsequently the reduction in real wages following stiffer conditions by the banks for granting credit led to some

localized explosions. The mobilization of the miners of the Kuzbass in 2010 was one of the most important of these explosions. But as a whole, the crisis had a negative influence on the dynamics of trade-union struggles: the development of new trade unions, which we had seen since 2009, slowed down considerably.

What is the strategy, if there is one, of socialists, anarchists and other political movements with respect to the protest movement? Do there exist connections between the groups? Do they take part in the mobilizations?

Pretty well all the organized left groups took part in the mobilizations and tried to build together a “left pole” during the meetings and demonstrations. Towards the end January, a Left Forum took place in Moscow, which elected a coordinating council and adopted a declaration concerning preparatory work for the creation of an anticapitalist party. It brought together the Left Front (a formation coming from the post-Stalinist radical Left), an important group coming from a split in the Communist Party of the Federation of Russia and some other left groups. The Socialist Movement of Russia (RSD) was also represented there. Some anarchists were present as observers.

Today, since the Parliament adopted a new “Law on parties” making it considerably easier to register political parties, we are negotiating the creation of a party intended to be registered: we envisage a kind of united front which will enable us to take part in elections together and will constitute a basis for future integration.

We know that the Communist Party of the Federation of Russia (KPRF) is nothing but a corrupt bureaucratic structure which has no intention of fighting for the improvement of the living conditions of the working class. But it is still capable of winning 20 per cent of the vote. What was the role of the KPRF in the mobilizations? Did it try to give the movement political perspectives?

In Moscow and St.-Petersburg, the KPFR came out officially against the movement, which its leader Gennady Zyuganov publicly described as “orange poison”. But at the local level, members and electors of the KPFR took part in the contestation. In some areas on the outskirts of Moscow they even played a central role in organizing the mobilizations in December. More generally speaking, the KPRF is a constituent element of the system of “directed democracy” and its leaders fear any destabilization. But at the same time, this party still attracts a lot of protest votes, which is why it must actively express its opposition to the present situation.

The ecological battle for the forest of Khimki in the summer of 2010 had great significance, at least for the inhabitants of Moscow, and seriously damaged the legitimacy of the government led by United Russia. Can we speak about institutional links between this type of social struggle and the movement?

The link between the social movements and the mobilizations themselves is very tenuous. The media and the Internet played a bigger role in unleashing the contestation than did practices tested out on the terrain social struggles. But it is probable that the echo given by the media to events such as the “Battle of Khimki” inspired many sectors of youth who had never had experience of taking to the street before December.

Since December we have been able to see that Medvedev tried to negotiate, even to find compromises with the opposition, at least as regards the political parties. Do you think that Putin will continue in this way or will his attitude with respect to the contestation harden?

At the present time, Medvedev looks like a classical “lame duck” in Russian politics: his promises and his initiatives are not worth much.

Two of the demands which he partially answered by having Parliament examine corresponding projects are the new law on parties and the return to direct election of provincial governors.

With regard to the first point, we are convinced that the new regulation on the registration of parties is a parody of political reform.

Previously, it was almost impossible for parties to register: in order to do so they had to have 50,000 members in more than half of the provinces of the country and to fill in an incredible quantity of administrative formalities in which the slightest error provided a good reason for the Ministry of Justice to cancel the registration. Today, it is the opposite: to register a political party they now ask you for practically nothing. Any group, however insignificant and lacking in influence it may be, can easily create a party which will have the possibility of taking part in political life and in particular in elections. However, it is forbidden for these parties to create electoral coalitions. Soon the political space will be transformed into a regroupment of a multitude of phantom-like structures and, in the end, into an arena favourable for the realization of the most rotten politicking tactics.

The second point, namely, the reintroduction of the direct election of provincial governors, which was annulled by Putin in 2004, is of much greater significance. This decision by Medvedev reflects a desire both to pretend to reach a compromise with the opposition and to satisfy a large part of the regional elites, most of whom are enraged by the diktats of the federal government. However, we can already foresee a large number of features of this reform which will make it possible for the President to interfere directly in the selection of the candidates who will be able to take part in the provincial elections.

The question of political prisoners is what which will really make it possible to test the willingness of the government to take even a little into consideration the demands of the protesters. It is closely related to the question of the independence and the corruption of the legal system. At the present time, hundreds of people are held in Russian prisons, under cover either of charges of "extremism", or of criminal charges cobbled together for political motives, or "convicted on orders", i.e., at the request of their business rivals who are close to the government. From the beginning, one of the principal demands of the movement concerned the revision of these cases.

Lists with the names of dozens of wrongfully convicted people, demanding the revision of their respective cases, were given to President Medvedev. Up to now, obviously, none of them has been released, and no revision of their cases has even started. On the contrary, in recent months, we have seen a hardening of repression of activists; and criminal cases under cover of violation of the anti-extremism law continue to be fabricated on a large scale.

There are good reasons to think that after Putin officially takes office in May, the pressure will further increase and the promises of Medvedev will be completely forgotten. We are profoundly convinced that the existing political system is incapable of being reformed. Its internal logic and its arsenal of repressive methods have been in place for a long time and their revision is not on the agenda. For substantial changes to take place, it is necessary to launch an even more massive and determined movement than the one that arose in December in the streets of Moscow.

At your last congress, you decided to unite with Socialist Résistance [1] to form the Socialist Movement of Russia. What are the perspectives and the obstacles that revolutionaries in Russia face with regard to the rebuilding of the Left on an anticapitalist basis, making it possible to reach out to broader layers of Russian society?

The unification took place a year ago and since then we have held two congresses. The principal idea was to create in Russia an anticapitalist party which would be pluralist, open and militant, which could put its ideas at the centre of the debate and the struggles that are taking place in society. The events of the last few months have shown the crucial need for such a political force. I hope that in the coming years we will be able to make great progress in this direction.

Interview conducted by Aykut Kiliç, April 6, 2012.

[1] Russian section of the Committee for a Workers' International, whose best-known section is the Socialist Party of England and Wales}}
(successor of the Militant Tendency)