

Something Is Happening and You Don't Know What It Is. Do You, Mr. Putin?

Lincoln A. Mitchell

December 15, 2011

It is obviously too early to know what the result of the demonstrations in Russia following the fraudulent election will be, but it is late enough to know that something significant is happening there. It is possible that these protests will be violently dispersed, that they will lead to some liberalization of the regime, set processes in motion that will lead to the collapse of the regime or simply wither away as Moscow's harsh winter settles in. Even if the protests lose their momentum or end violently, they will have marked a change in the way Putin's regime in Russia functions. The sheen not just of invulnerability, but also of being efficient and insulated from all criticism, has been removed; and the world has seen that.

Putin's strongman regime has long drawn its legitimacy not from winning free, fair and competitive elections, but by the popularity of Putin himself and the strength of the regime. Both of these things are now drawn into question by the poor showing of Putin's United Russia party in the polls and the newly discovered increased willingness on the part of ordinary Russians to protest against Putin's rule. Even if these protests do not lead to any significant change, the people of Russia may no longer view Putin's rule as inevitable or unassailable. Accordingly, the Russian government will have to respond to these demonstrations either by liberalizing somewhat or by taking a more authoritarian turn. The latter approach is considerably more likely, but even that offers little guarantee of stability for Putin and his supporters. The current demonstrations, after all, occurred in spite of an increasingly unfree media and civic environment in Russia. Limiting these freedoms even more will not be easy, especially now.

Nonetheless, extrapolating frustration with the corruption, misrule, election fraud and declining economic fortunes associated with Putin's regime to mean a desire for liberal democratic governance in Russia, however, would be a mistake. It should be kept in mind that the party that came in second in the recent parliamentary election was the Communist Party, while western oriented liberal parties did not do particularly well in the election. Many of the demonstrators may be western oriented, but among elements of the broader Russian population who share their critique of Putin, political sympathies are notably different.

The demonstrations that are now occurring are also significant because, Putin's protestations notwithstanding, the U.S. has not been a driving force behind these demonstrations. Restrictions in recent years on Russian organizations receiving funding from western donors, the ability of American NGOs to function in Russia and even on western election monitors for this election, have combined to significantly limit the potential impact of the west in post-election scenarios in Russia. In this regard, Moscow in 2011 is most definitively not Kiev in 2004.

If Putin is able to convince the Russian people, as well as himself, that these protests are the result of a western plot, the short term policy prescriptions will be a lot more clear. The policy will consist of further limiting American and other western funds from supporting Russian NGOs, ratcheting up the anti-American rhetoric from state run media organs, playing the nationalist card even more strongly and similar tactics. These policies, however, will likely have only a modest impact because they would be ignoring the more difficult reality that these protests are far more organic than Putin would like to believe.

For Russian citizens who are concerned about the way their own government works, and the contempt in which

that government holds ordinary citizens, gratuitous anti-American gestures may not resonate as much as the Russian regime would like. Putin is, therefore, in a difficult situation with no easy choices. There is still a long way between this and any meaningful change to the regime, let alone democratization, but it is unlikely that the smoothly functioning, orderly semi-authoritarian regime which we saw in Russia during the last few years can be fully restored.