

Putin's Diminishing Options

Lincoln A. Mitchell

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With the March 4th election rapidly approaching in Russia, it is becoming increasingly clear that Prime Minister, and presidential candidate, Vladimir Putin has backed himself into a corner from which it will be difficult to extricate himself. Moreover, the possibility of using violence to crackdown on demonstrators, or to keep his regime in power, will likely grow over the next months, particularly after the election.

The air of invulnerability which surrounded the Putin regime during most of its first decade in power has been replaced by uncertainty. Putin may, indeed, remain in power after the election, but he will have to use means other than personal popularity and a growing economy to buttress his repressive regime. Without these assets, it would seem that Putin is faced with several options: liberalize and allow the opposition to win something, do nothing and hope for the best, or crackdown more to ensure that the regime stays in place for the short term.

A closer look at the situation faced by Putin, as well as by other leaders in similar situations, indicates that the only remaining card he can really play is to crackdown more. Taking a harder line is, in some respects, a high risk strategy. It has worked in some cases, most notably in China in 1989 where the bloody Tiananmen Square crackdown has helped the Chinese Communist Party to remain in power for more than two decades following the that incident. However, in other countries, including the recent case of Libya, a harder line by an embattled authoritarian has only hastened his decline. Russia is not yet in a comparable situation to Libya under Gaddafi, but the central lesson is still relevant.

Putin will nonetheless be inclined to crackdown because the other options, while perhaps more appealing and more likely to lead to a peaceful outcome in which Putin might preserve some role for himself, are not as viable as they initially seem. The reason for this is that while Russia is not close to being a democracy, it is also not run entirely by one man. While Putin may have centralized a great deal of political power, there are others who have loyally supported him, and dramatically enriched themselves through business, corruption and exploiting their relationship with Putin. These people have more to lose than Putin if there is a peaceful transition. Many of them will face possible jail time, find that there are not many places to which they can flee, and may lose much of their wealth.

If Putin moves towards taking a more moderate stand, it is this core of supporters, many of whom are very important to the regime, who will oppose it. If his closest circle of supporters will not support any option than a crackdown, Putin will have very little choice but to pursue that policy. Thus, Putin may find himself in the strange position of being the moderate in the ruling party. He is the one who has to think, at least a little bit, about his legacy, and who will have the greatest likelihood of patching together a decent life if there is a smooth transition to a post-Putin Russia, but the people around him will have much fewer opportunities of that kind. Ultimately, Putin's hands are tied not by his opponents, but by his closest supporters.

It is possible that Putin will find another way out of this situation. He might create or exacerbate an external crisis to try to rebuild his support; the opposition could make several missteps or become hopelessly divided; or Putin might stand up to his supporters and do the right thing for himself and his country. However, barring a radical shift in events or approach that would be needed for any of these outcomes, the next few months in Russia could become ugly, before they get better.