Anti-Putin demonstrations show crack in Putin’s system

Martin Suchanek Wed, 21/12/2011 - 12:38
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The Arab Spring has developed into a Russian Winter. Despite icy temperatures and snow, 50,000 people packed into Bolotnaya Square, Moscow on 7 December in the largest protest yet seen in the city against the once and future President? Vladimir Putin and his "managed democracy". It was a fitting conclusion to a year that began with the protests and uprising in Tunisia that have since spread around the world.

Across the river, within sight of the Kremlin, the demonstration was ringed by tens of thousands of police and interior ministry troops. The most common chants included ?a Russia without Putin?, and "Down with the party of crooks and thieves" ? a reference to Putin and Medvedev?s United Russia party. Some shouted "Putin is a crook and a thief!"

Rallies also took place in more than 50 cities; 7,000 in St Petersburg and 4,000 in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk in a temperature of -20C.

The majority of protesters were students and educated middle class professionals, alienated from Putin's authoritarian regime and clearly inspired by democratic movements around the world. The fact that Medvedev and Putin want to play pass the parcel with the presidency and the premiership has offended the self-respect of many young Russians.

Over the preceding week, some 800 people had been detained and demonstrators roughed up. Putin mobilised his youth organisations against the demonstrations. The youth wing of United Russia, ?Nashi? [Ours], and another pro-Putin organisation, ?Molodaia Gvardiia?, Young Guard, used drums and loudspeakers to drown out protesters. On the 7 December, however, the police held back.

Electoral fraud

The protests started when it was announced that United Russia had gained around 49.5 per cent of the vote, according to the Central Election Commission ? down from the 64 per cent it gained in 2007. The party lost more than 60 of its 315 seats and voter turnout was down by 10 per cent. In itself this indicates a mounting discontent with the 12-year reign of Putin and the fact that his term could be legally prolonged until 2024.

But this was not all ? large numbers of the demonstrators were convinced that even these results were rigged. International monitors at 150 polling stations said conditions at 34 of them were "very bad", and there have been widespread reports of multiple voting, stuffed ballot boxes and public sector workers pressured by their bosses to vote for United Russia. In Chechnya, United Russia received a Stalinist era vote of 99.48 per cent, doubly incredible given the Kremlin?s two bloody wars and occupation of the
country. In Rostov, when votes were shown on television, they totalled 146 percent of the electorate - even better than Stalin managed!

Only seven parties were allowed to stand candidates for parliament and many opposition groups were barred from the race. Three of them benefited from the falling support for United Russia. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) led by Gennady Zyuganov, received 19.16 percent of the votes, almost double its 2007 vote. ?A Just Russia? - a party set up with Kremlin funding and claiming to be ?social democratic? - won 13.22 percent, whilst the extreme right racist Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) headed by Vladimir Zhirinovsky, won 11.66 percent. The liberal ?Yabloko? party won less than the grossly undemocratic 7 per cent hurdle needed to gain seats in parliament.

Why now?

There are several reasons for this:

Russia has seen significant economic growth over recent years. However, that growth was, and is, based largely on selling the natural resources of the country on the world market. Russian industry is confined to a few sectors, such as armaments and even there it faces growing competition. The country's super-rich billionaires are not only super-rich, but also super-parasitic. Their wealth is largely based on their ability to plunder the country rather than any ability to really restructure and bring forward the economy.

As long as the economy was growing, such a system was able to maintain social peace via a mixture of repression, clientelism, some social concessions and a massive dose of Russian imperial chauvinism and nationalism even if this was the peace of a graveyard. Now, a change in the underlying economic conditions is shaking this phoney democracy of an essentially Bonapartist regime.

This is made worse by the fact that the Putin-system - originally designed to remove the parasitic and incompetent Yeltsin-system and establish a self-confident, strong Russian state - has itself expanded. Now, the economic base necessary to deliver a bonus here, a bit of money and privilege there, for an ever larger number of corrupt, mediocre and incompetent bureaucrats and businessmen associated with the state and the ruling clique has deteriorated and looks set to get worse.

Even more important for the future is the fact that the state plans to redistribute even more of the country's wealth from the poor to the rich. Putin's 2012-14 budget envisages a massive increase in the military and repressive apparatus and savage cuts across a wide range of social services. There are growing attempts to privatise education and medical care which will hit both the young and the elderly.

The left wing activist Boris Kagarlitsky points out in the Moscow Times, ?managed democracy only works well when the economy is booming. During an economic crisis, it runs into trouble. When the people's standard of living falls and the political elite turn a deaf ear to the problem, the people reach a point where their greatest frustration is not with the economic hardships they face but with authorities who prevent them from effectively voicing their dissatisfaction.?

The mass demonstrations in December have clearly shaken the regime, they have put Putin and Medvedev on the defensive for the moment. Like in many previous cases in history, it was parts of the middle strata, the youth, the intelligentsia who took to the streets. But the significance goes much further, it is an indicator of the ferment of social and political tensions in Russian society.
Now the question is, which of the opposition forces can use the ?space? that has been opened, and how. The leadership of the demonstrations, and those who get media coverage, are often more or less left wing liberals or, at best, petit-bourgeois democrats. Increasingly, even the fake, capitalist opposition from Yabloko will try to put themselves at the head of this movement.

Likewise, the so-called ?Communist Party? presents itself as the only ?real opposition? force. In reality, this party is itself chauvinist and nationalist and a fake ?opposition? to Putin and his henchmen. The bourgeois and ?Communist? opposition leaders are opposed to Putin and call for a greater ?democratic? share of power. At the same time, however, they share one key element of Putin's politics ? Greater Russian chauvinism and racism.

One has to ask: where have these ?oppositional leaders? been, when the war against Chechnya was waged? When have they protested and rallied against the racist attacks on Caucasian people in the large Russian cities? What have they done in order to secure or defend workers' rights? Here lies the real difficulty and challenge.

Over the next months, the Russian left, the social movements have to set themselves the task of building a political alternative to these fake opposition forces ? a genuine revolutionary working class party, which can link the struggle against the authoritarian, presidential regime and for democratic rights with the struggle for the rights of the working class, socially and nationally oppressed. In this way, the mass demonstrations can become the starting point for the re-creation not only of a new, mass movement led by the working class, but of genuine revolutionary communism in the land of the October revolution.

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