

Perspectives on Putin's Russia

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"Every generation needs a new revolution." — Thomas Jefferson

"The most dangerous thing is to create a system of permanent revolution." — Vladimir Putin

THE DEMONSTRATIONS OF December 10 and 24, 2012 in Moscow, in which tens of thousands of people took part, show clearly that the period of social passivity in Russia is nearing its end. The last time such large demonstrations took place in Moscow was in 1990-91 at the height of the democratic wave directed against the domination of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Then, as a result of these mass actions, the whole party-state system of the USSR began to crumble. Those who participated in those events 20 years ago are feeling the same atmosphere again.

The rising wave of protest has demystified the key myth of Putinism, of a durable "consensus" between the people and the authorities in Russia. What was revealed is that it was not just a few small "marginal" groups but masses of ordinary active people who no longer were willing to exchange their civil and political rights for Putin-style "stability."

Many people were surprised by such an awakening after ten years of social hibernation. In fact, it was inevitable: The margin of security of the regime that took power in Russia at the outset of the 21st century was limited from the beginning.

Putin's "Bonapartism"

The emergence of Vladimir Putin's authoritarian regime was a logical consequence of the political and socio-economic processes that had developed in Russia since the beginning of the 1990s. The collapse of the party-state and the formation of nation-states on the ruins of the Soviet empire marked the advent of a bourgeois-democratic revolution. But this revolution only partly carried out its work of radically democratizing the political system and expropriating its bureaucratic ruling class.

The democracy movement was coopted by political forces representing a "reformist" section of the old bureaucracy, which seriously reduced the extent of the transformations. Instead of creating a completely new political system by the convocation of a Constituent Assembly, there emerged a mixture of old Soviet institutions and authoritarian presidential structures. In 1993 the latter won out, which led to the installation of a "hyperpresidential" republic.

Since the basis of the old regime had not been destroyed and since the new authorities were born of collusion between ruling groups, the key posts in the post-Soviet political elite were occupied by

members of the former nomenklatura. Thus the period 1992-1999 was a kind of a slow Thermidor of the third Russian revolution. [“Thermidor” refers to the month of the suppression of the Jacobins in the French Revolution in 1794. Thermidor has come to mean a victory of social and political forces that are hostile to the further progress of revolution and establish their own rule over society in the interests of the new elites.]

As the historical experience of past revolutions shows, after Thermidor comes Bonapartism: a system in which the state bureaucracy, usually subordinated to one man at the top, obtains a high degree of independence from society, concentrates all power in its hands and while serving the social interests of economically dominant classes, it suppresses them, as well as other social groups, politically.

Having completed the process of privatization toward the end of the ‘90s, the ruling class wanted a stable system that would guarantee the continuance of the new status quo. So it no longer needed the liberal elements of the political regime that had enabled the elite groups to express their positions and compete during the redistribution of former state property.

This strong demand for conservatism materialized in the figure of Putin, the supreme arbiter and guardian of the new order. So Putin became the unique center of real power, elections to ruling institutions were eliminated in practice, the party system was replaced by a group of puppets subservient to the Kremlin, the media were transformed into a propaganda machine, etc.

All this was just fine for the bulk of officials, upper managers and businessmen, docile members of Putin’s party United Russia, as the price paid for “stability.” This situation closely resembled the one Karl Marx described in his article on French Bonapartism in the Nineteenth Century:

“The bourgeoisie confesses that its own interests dictate that it should be delivered from the danger of its own rule; that to restore tranquility in the country its bourgeois parliament must, first of all, be given its quietus; that to preserve its social power intact its political power must be broken; that the individual bourgeois can continue to exploit the other classes and to enjoy undisturbed property, family, religion, and order only on condition that their class be condemned along with the other classes to like political nullity; that in order to save its purse it must forfeit the crown, and the sword that is to safeguard it must at the same time be hung over its own head as a sword of Damocles.” (The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, 1852)

The Popular Mood

If the majority of the ruling class supported the installation of a Bonapartist regime, the rest of the Russian population didn’t much seem to care. In the early 2000s there were fewer than 10,000 people still ready to demonstrate for freedom of expression in Moscow; even fewer came out against the second war in Chechnya.

Soon those demonstrations petered out, and even the explosion of the “revolt of the pensioners,” after in-kind social old-age and disability benefits were replaced by inadequate cash payments, didn’t change the situation. This apathy is best explained by the fact that the Putin regime took power at a time when the economy was going through a rather stable period.

Naturally the authorities attributed this to their own wise policies, but in reality this phenomenon resulted from objective factors. First, the structural readjustment of the Russian economy was now completed, so the serious recession of 1992-1999 ended. Second, the price of petroleum products, Russia’s chief export, began to rise. Finally, the financial crisis of 1998 brought about a sharp rise in the price of imported goods; this led to a rising demand for cheaper, Russian goods in the internal

market.

With the end of the 1990s — and the end of crises, budget deficits, galloping inflation and delays in the payment of salaries and pensions — people sighed with relief. The improvement of the socio-economic situation seemed to make the masses overlook for the moment the reduction of their political and civil rights.

Nonetheless, periods of reaction are always followed by social and political upsurges. The less people are obsessed with daily survival, the more their horizons widen, the more they are ready for conscious activism.

Besides, the increase in general wealth poses the question of its distribution: who benefits most from this economic stability? As the history of popular movements shows — from the early 20th century uprisings in Russia to the recent Arab Spring — the potential for explosive protest can accumulate behind the outward facade of well-being under authoritarian regimes.

Putin was mistaken in believing that the rising price of oil would enable him to buy the allegiance of the masses. Even though the price of oil when the economic crisis broke out in 2008 was twice as high as in 2000, from that point on, according to public opinion polls, the authorities were losing ground. And the reason was not just stagnant real income; more important was the feeling of the injustice of a system where a minority enjoys all the benefits while the great majority only get crumbs.

Indeed, since the advent of the “Putin order” social inequalities in Russia have not stopped getting worse. The richest 14 people concentrate in their hands 26% of the Gross National Product.

Hidden behind the massive media coverage of “the struggle against the oligarchs” who enriched themselves in the 1990s, huge material resources have been taken over by the clan of businessmen close to Putin and by the siloviki (members of the “enforcement agencies:” Army, Interior, FSB, etc.)

At the same time, the split between the most wealthy and the poorest has grown to a ratio of 1 to 17. The relative poverty of the majority of the Russian population has increased despite some income growth in the five years following 2000.

Putin’s “reinforcement of the State,” with no control from below, made it possible for the bureaucracy to begin lining its pockets as well as those of its friends in the business world. This was happening at every level of the state system from the president down to the townships in their districts. And what was the risk, when the fate of a functionary depended not on his voters but on his allegiance to the hierarchy, and even more when it is impossible to criticize these authorities in the media, which are subservient to this very bureaucracy?

The logical outcome was a veritable explosion of corruption: according to Transparency International, Russia fell from the 82nd to the 143rd place, with a level of corruption comparable to that of Nigeria and Uganda. So it is totally logical that the ruling party is nicknamed “the party of crooks and thieves.”

But a mature industrial society with developed technologies (notably information and communication), high degrees of urbanization and popular education is naturally incompatible with authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. The emblematic figure of this society is the skilled worker whose daily activity requires a certain autonomy and analytical capacities, and who can’t be entirely cut off from access to information nor isolated from other people.

Such a person naturally aspires to freedom in private and public life and what is more, demands to

participate in political life. It is for this reason that so-called Communist regimes collapsed, just as the dictatorship in Belarus and (in the long run) China are doomed to failure. And it is for that reason that Putinism in Russia can only be a passing phenomenon, even if the economic conjuncture were more favorable than it is now.

According to a poll, 75% of the participants in the big demonstration of December 24 were salaried workers in non-managerial positions. Two-thirds were low and medium-low income; on the other hand, their level of education was rather high, as 83% had the equivalent of Bachelors or Masters degrees.

Thus, one of the main forces in the struggle for democracy is this 21st century proletariat — skilled, educated, but deprived of a decent share of the public wealth. The same social layer is driving the social movements in Europe.

As for political opinions, a plurality (38%) of the demonstrators called themselves democrats, 31% sympathized with the liberals. As a general rule, the leaders reflect the movement. They are democrats in the broad sense of the term who have no clear social program or penchant for liberal positions.

Despite what is proclaimed by official propagandists, a “Communist backlash” does not represent a real threat in Russia after the overthrow of Bonapartism. It is no accident that the Communist Party separated itself from the mass protests, calling them “the orange plague” (an allusion to the Ukrainian revolution): the Party has always been a hanger-on of the Putin regime, whose fall would weaken rather than strengthen it.

The Crisis Below and Above

The events of December, 2011 show that Putinism’s time is running out, if it hasn’t already. A classic symptom of a pre-revolutionary situation is emerging: “Those below are no longer willing to live as before.”

What about a crisis at the top? By supporting the installation of Putin’s Bonapartist regime, the Russian bourgeoisie of bankers and big company owners won big gains. It was in its interests that the State Duma (the Russian parliament), subservient to the President and transformed into a rubber stamp, adopted favorable new laws on taxes, labor, real estate, etc.

However, with the passage of time the Russian business community began to worry about a “Sword of Damocles” hanging over their heads, as in the case of Mikhail Khodorkovski, ready to fall on any businessman who loses the favor of the central or local bureaucracy.

Moreover, the siloviki had much too zealously transferred resources into the hands of the military-industrial group within the ruling class, provoking the animosity of the bosses of civilian industries, above all in the energy sector. And Putin-Medvedev’s foreign policy hardly corresponded to the needs of the stock-holders in Gazprom for example, who were obliged to foot the bill for increased military spending and for actions aimed at restoring Russia’s “great power” status like the military interventions in Georgia.

The symptoms of the cleavage within the ruling class had to find an expression in the highest governmental circles. This is what happened in November 2011 when Finance Minister Kudrin stood up against the anti-social 2012-14 budget.

The fact that Kudrin, the “first liberal of the system,” failed to show himself indifferent to the needs of public health and education, once again sacrificed for military expenses, testifies to the indignation of part of the business community against the economic ascendancy of the military-industrial complex.

But the main symptom of the crisis of the current administrative model was the inability of the Putin bureaucracy to successfully carry on electoral fraud during the parliamentary elections. The techniques that worked in 2007 and 2008 flopped this time.

Given this failure of the regime, some elements in the puppet political structures that had until recently been playing the role of a domesticated opposition have taken courage and begun to move. The attempts by some representatives of “Just Russia” to act independently show the decadence of the Putin system. Finally even Medvedev, the alter ego of the “national leader,” has declared that “the old political model is outdated” and promised some surface reforms.

But the concession that Russian society is demanding of the Bonapartist regime — free and fair elections — is incompatible with the very existence of the regime. The little group around the “national leader” that has concentrated all power in its hands understands this very well, and knows that the path of reform is closed to it.

Thus, “above it is no longer possible to rule as before” — which, according to Tocqueville and Lenin, precedes revolution.

From Crisis to Revolution?

However, a pre-revolutionary situation is not yet the revolution. The success of the revolution depends above all on the choice of the methods of struggle. Mass demonstrations are good for demonstrating and consolidating forces, but in themselves are not able to make the authorities capitulate.

As historical experience shows, the most effective method is the political strike. It means that the protesters are capable not just of talking but of acting, of imposing their pressure and the functioning of the state organs and, if necessary, of paralyzing them.

No victorious democratic revolution of the 20th and 21st century has succeeded without political strikes. But during the recent events in Russia, this crucial word strike has not yet been pronounced, has not become a slogan. Doubtless, the initiators of these actions were afraid that such a radical call would not be supported by the masses; the lack of strike experience and the extreme weakness of the independent union movement are also factors.

The objective task of the democratic revolution in Russia consists in liberating civil society from the authoritarian and bureaucratic yoke, in creating a political space where all social forces can express their interests. In the long term, this will permit the void on the left wing of the political milieu in Russia to be filled. The absence of an organized left movement (outside of tiny Trotskyist and anarchist groups) cannot continue for a long time, and the different Stalinists and phony social democrats of “Just Russia” party parading as Leftists are not up to filling the bill.

Today already, 17% of the protesters identify with the non-Communist Left. Their position is not yet represented politically. But sooner or later, the consolidation of the democratic left forces that are anti-totalitarian, internationalist and defend human rights and the rights of workers must begin.

Although it may upset the prudent “Communist” party leader Zhuganov, Russia has not “used up her supply of revolutions.” History knows no limits to this supply: for example, in France it took four revolutions over 80 years to establish a democratic system.

Despite the pre-revolutionary situation in Russia, the victory of the democratic revolution in the near future is not in the least assured. The death-throes of the Bonapartist regime could last a certain amount of time. But the revolution is ripening; sooner or later it will break out.

Alex Gusev, 29 December 2011

P.S.

* Against the Current 158, May/June 2012. <http://www.solidarity-us.org/>