

# Symbolic Politics or Real Problems

## The Agenda for the Russian Elections

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For many observers, almost everything concerning the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections in Russia (December 2011 and March 2012) is predictable. Some thus prefer to look beyond 2012 and prophesize about 2014, 2017, or 2018. Others point at the power struggle “under the carpet” between influential groups within the ruling elite. Others forecast mass unrest.

There is, however, at least one important dimension of the current political situation in Russia that is somewhat tangible and should be analyzed. It is the competition between symbolic politics and a real policy agenda. This struggle reflects the way the state positions itself vis-à-vis society and holds unique significance for the future of Russia.

### **Putin’s Symbolic Politics**

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has always been strong in symbolic politics. He consolidated Russia’s symbolic space, beginning with the re-introduction of the Soviet anthem and then the use of Tsarist state symbols (using television adeptly as his major messenger).

His attention to political symbols has been especially clear in his approach to the annual Battle of Stalingrad commemorations. The battle was the turning point in World War II and remains the greatest pride of the Russian people. Putin has visited Volgograd (the former Stalingrad) several times, usually in February, the date of the surrender of the German Army in Stalingrad and now an official military holiday. His actions have reinforced his link to “the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic war.” Through the fanfare, he has provided the Russian people with a set of sociocultural references and implemented symbols that have appealed to a population disoriented by the tumultuous 1990s.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In a revealing move, Putin did not visit Volgograd in February 2008, sending his “heir” Medvedev there instead.

As president, Putin personally controlled the content of school history textbooks and even interfered in a local Rostov initiative to “rehabilitate” the Cossack *ataman* Pyotr Krasnov, the leader of the Cossack Republic during the Russian Civil War who later sided with Nazi Germany and was hung as a war criminal in 1946. When Putin arrived in Rostov in February 2008, the Cossack leaders repudiated the initiative.

Today, Putin continues using “symbolic politics,” particularly while firing up the country’s election campaigns. During Victory Day celebrations in May 2011, he appeared in Volgograd to announce the creation of the National Front political movement – a super party organization aimed at eclipsing the tarnished United Russia Party. His choice of location and the organization’s name are good examples of his approach to politics. One of Putin’s most recent initiatives was bathed in symbolism. He proposed to members of his cabinet to pool their private money to erect a monument to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin. As one of the last statesmen of the old Tsarist empire and a formidable orator, he once apparently said, “They need great upheavals, we need a Great Russia.”

### **Erosion of Symbolic Politics**

The economic crisis of 2008, however, changed the social and economic agenda. It shifted society’s expectations, and consequently top-down symbolic landscaping lost its political novelty.

President Dmitry Medvedev, a politician out of the Putin school, has tried to utilize symbolism – the most visual example being the renaming of the “militia” to the “politsia” (police). Such a move was criticized even by Medvedev’s supporters as a senseless one. Some considered it a substitute or even a parody of needed militia reform, while others interpreted the move as a sign of Medvedev’s inability to act against the prime minister’s will and, therefore, of his political limitations.

Overall, it became obvious that the problem is not personal. The regime has lost its ability to solve its own inherent problems. With independent social structures weakened by the state, nothing controls the state apparatus, and this has emerged as a problem rather than as an engine for change or progress. Medvedev’s term has made clear the main flaw of so-called Putinism: the government’s inability to handle the challenge of reforming the Russian government. Therefore, the political situation is a new one. The state’s impotence and corruption is now at the center of the agenda, and society demonstrates a desire for reform and greater control of the state. Unable to meet such expectations, the leadership continues to rely on empty signifiers such as the National Front.

### **Alternative Agenda Setting**

The major challenge for the regime is posed not by opposition politicians that have lost the fight for control over symbolic space but by other individuals and organizations. Examples include the expose of widespread corruption in the spending of state budget funds (Aleksei Navalny’s blog, [navalny.livejournal.com](http://navalny.livejournal.com), has over fifty thousand “friends”). The popular Internet series, “Poet and Citizen,” with verses written by

acclaimed writer Dmitry Bykov and read by famous actor Mikhail Efremov, sarcastically comments on the stupidity of the state machine and, basically, the entire political situation in Russia.

The “Defenders of the Khimki Forest” is another example that points out the omnipotence of big corporations vis-à-vis the common people. Their efforts to save a small slice of land have attracted civil activists from all over Russia. The agenda of Evgenia Chirikova, a Khimki coalition organizer, now goes beyond this topic. In the summer of 2011, her group opened an “Anti-Seliger” youth camp to oppose the pro-Kremlin Nashi youth camp on Lake Seliger, featuring participants like Navalny and Sergey Mironov, leader of the Just Russia Party who recently lost his position as chairman of the Federation Council, the Russian parliament’s upper house.

Another notable figure is former MP Evgeni Roizman of Yekaterinburg, who is waging his own private war on drugs. Recently, a follower of his from Nizhny Tagil, Yegor Bychkov, seized Russia’s attention when he was prosecuted after applying involuntary methods of rehabilitation to drug addicts without their agreement (albeit with that of their relatives). The real debate here was that the state had failed on all sides. Russia has a poor record of accomplishment in stopping and controlling the spread of narcotics, and, like many such small-scale examples, people are doing for themselves what the state cannot do for them.

Another example are the wildfires of the summer of 2010, when thousands of people organized themselves, volunteered their time, and risked their lives. They did this because the national firefighting service proved inefficient.

Interethnic relations are another topic attracting activists within the “new agenda.” Typically labeled “nationalists” or even “fascists” by authorities, many such activists in fact speak about the inability of the state to provide equal levels of law enforcement across the land. They also point to discrepancies in obedience to the law by minority youth who are protected by politically influential “diasporas” in many Russian cities. While the events on Manezh Square in December 2010 were a sign of a new nationalism, they were provoked by the police’s simple failure to act appropriately in a criminal case.

Several catastrophes of recent years, including a fire in a Perm night club in December 2009 and the sinking of the *Bulgaria* cruise ship in July 2011, were widely considered proof that the state bureaucracy is impotent and corrupt – underlined in all these cases is the generally low social tolerance for officials in control of safety matters who use their positions to rake in bribes (often, as in these cases, the facts are less important than the widespread belief that they are true).

More and more, Russia’s alternative agenda is being carried out through social networks such as Live Journal and Facebook (and its Russian clone *Vkontakte*, In Contact). To close or restrict access to the Internet seems politically dangerous for a ruling group that hopes to keep good relations with the West. While Internet politics probably seem too small to be taken seriously in the upcoming election cycle, the importance of new media reflects the gradual decrease of the traditional mass media, especially television, once the major pillar of Putin’s symbolic universe.

## **Future of the Russian State**

The current Russian regime has invented institutional restrictions preventing opposition parties from being registered and participating in elections, but it has no way to respond to the widespread dissatisfaction with the state's inefficiency. The deficiencies of Russian parties have finally resulted in some new forms of political activism that have yet to be institutionalized but are already shaping a clear political agenda. The Kremlin is attempting to fix the political system via a traditional framework, by boosting a new center-right political party (led by billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov). Attempts to incorporate leaders of new political movements into the existing party system have not been successful. It remains to be seen whether the new "people-politicians" will be able to form a really new democratic party, claiming its own right to control the state.

In some senses, Russian society is returning to the 1990s, when the state abandoned many of its former responsibilities, which caused social self-organization and the first boom of citizen activism. The Putin decade seemed to convince society that the state would function. However, at the end of this decade, we have witnessed the state once again become inefficient. Society has had to again mobilize to solve its own daily problems. Civil society is reborn through a total vexation with the structural problems of local and national government.

Not only will the current election campaigns set the stage for several more years of Russia's history, the current political situation may be read as a case study of the limits of symbolic politics. Putin's past success with symbols reflected a situation of relative consensus regarding the major problems the government needed to solve. Today, symbols cannot replace real solutions to burning problems. Symbolic moves are inadequate. Whether or not empty symbolism gives way to more realistic policies via the elections, it is clear that Russia's new agenda will soon completely replace the current one anchored by "Putin's stability." Any new political force that comes to power in Russia will face the difficult task of re-establishing state institutions and remedying state-society relations.