



Strengthening Putin's Political Position in Russia

Łukasz Jasina

The result of the presidential election in the United States will strengthen the political position of Russian President Vladimir Putin, both in terms of internal political power and international relations. Putin's aim is to extend his regime's hold on power, via re-election in 2018. He will seek to gain from the electoral defeat of foreign politicians who condemned his actions in Ukraine and Syria, and on the domestic front his party in the September parliamentary election will prove an important instrument for strengthening his power.

Reactions in Russia. Russian mass media presented Donald Trump in a positive light from the moment his candidacy was announced. On the eve of the U.S. presidential election, with Hillary Clinton expected to win, media attacks against her increased. After the announcement of the preliminary results, these attacks were replaced by jubilation at Trump's victory, defined by the official comments as a defeat for the "anti-Russian" U.S. establishment and heralding potential improvements in relations between Russia and the United States. Putin congratulated Trump on his victory, pointing out the problems that the U.S. and Russia must overcome together. Yet at the same time government media reported the failure of Barack Obama and Clinton to take serious action against Russia in relation to its aggression against Ukraine in, perhaps suggesting the line that the Kremlin "won" this battle and "proving" the correctness of Putin's policy. In the Russian public perception, this may strengthen the position of the current head of state.

Key Change. In July this year, the Russian president replaced the governors of the Yaroslavl, Kaliningrad and Kirov districts, and the governor of the city of Sevastopol. In August, he dismissed Sergei Ivanov, head of the presidential administration and in October appointed Sergei Naryshkin (former chairman of the State Duma, deputy prime minister and head of the presidential administration) as head of the Federal Foreign Intelligence Service. The nomination of an official of such high rank to the position of chief of intelligence can be considered meant to emphasise the importance of this function—and of the intelligence service as a whole—in the hierarchy of state institutions.

The relative young age of appointees in the reshuffle is also worth noting. Long-established Putin associate Sergei Ivanov, 63, was replaced by Anton Vaino, 44, an official without his own political base. In Sevastopol, Vice admiral Sergey Menaylo, 56, was replaced by Dmitry Ovsyannikov, 39.

Thus, among the most important people in the country there is a growing number who depend directly on the president and have no political position in their own right. Those departing, on the other hand, remember a time before Putin came to power.

Election to the Duma. The election to the State Duma were held on 18 September, and resulted in a more consolidated position for Putin as Russia's supreme power. Some heads of Russian republics (among them, Komi, Chechnya and Tuva), as well as governors and local legislative assemblies were also elected, with voting deadlines scheduled for the end of summer when public interest is traditionally lower. This means that, despite official encouragement to vote, the authorities in fact depended on low turnouts. A 47.9% turnout was reported officially (compared to the actual figure of approximately 37%), and, according to the "Map of Election Fraud," the elections were probably rigged in favour of the winning party, United Russia. Regardless of the real scale of fraud, it is certain that more than half of eligible voters did not participate in the parliamentary election. The low turnout confirms public apathy, a lack of faith in the possibility of a change in Russia's political system, and low motivation to initiate social protests nationwide.

United Russia, the pro-Putin ruling party, won the election decisively, obtaining a qualified majority in the Duma (343 MPs out of a total of 450). Representatives of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (42 MPs), the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (39) and Just Russia (23) also gained seats in the lower house.

The execution and result of the election show that Putin's efforts to consolidate include focus on the Duma as an influential political centre in Russia. With its majority, United Russia can now make swifter and more efficient systemic legal changes.

Medvedev and Lavrov. Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's position remains unthreatened, even though state media reported in August that more than 170,000 people had signed a petition calling for his dismissal. As Russia's second in command, Medvedev must be shown to be completely loyal to Putin and lacking any significant political base of his own. Moreover, any change would be undesirable because it could lead to speculation about Putin's successor. The prime minister can also take responsibility for the consequences of difficult domestic economic and political decisions, allowing the president to avoid settlements and thus to occupy a comfortable position as arbitrator.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also occupies an unthreatened position, as any change in the occupancy of his post would signify a change in Russia's foreign policy. With Lavrov in place, it is clear that the Kremlin is not altering the basic course of this policy.

Further Special Services and Intelligence Reform. Russian media report rumours about both ongoing and scheduled reform of the special services in 2017. Such changes would include the establishment of a Ministry of State Security, consisting of the existing Federal Security Service and Internal Intelligence. Despite a press statement denying the reform, issued by Sergei Ivanov, former head of the presidential administration, it is likely that any changes would be presented as a continuation of existing projects. On 5 April, Putin issued a decree to the effect that the Federal Service of the National Guard, Russia's elite troops led by Viktor Zlotov, would take measures to combat domestic terrorism. In June, the Duma transferred the powers of the Federal Ministry of the Interior Migration Service and the Federal Drug Control Service to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. There has also been a change in the leadership of the Federal Service of Foreign Intelligence, indicating the ongoing reshaping of Russia's power structures.

A possible consequence of the reform will be the improvement of the work of the special services, which are very important in the Russian power system. Merging structures into a single body will strengthen the president's control over the secret services. This decision, however, carries the risk of weakening Putin in the future, as the head of the resulting "super ministry" may in fact gain enormous power and attempt to build their own political position.

Conclusions. Winning the next presidential election is not Putin's only goal, especially as he seeks to secure long-term power. He wanted to ensure United Russia's had a sufficient majority in the Duma to make constitutional changes that would enable reforms such as lifting restrictions on the presidential term of office, thus ensuring him (at least theoretically) lifetime power. Another possible change relates to the powers and place in the political system of other bodies such as the executive, the legislature, the judiciary, and (already of little significance) the independence of the republics and autonomous regions.

Putin's recent actions also prove that he feared disloyalty among representatives of the power structures, and will replace them with people strongly dependent on him.

Another reason for these decisions may be the fear of a systemic crisis if Russia's interior situation deteriorates. The hierarchy of the state, consolidated and completely dominated by Putin, will not be able to muster any competition against the centre.

In relations with the U.S. and the European Union, the current tough rhetoric that prevents any solution to the existing conflicts will continue. The U.S. is not ready to agree to Russia's conditions, as evidenced by the suspension of talks on the situation in Syria. A compromise between Russia and Western partners (the United States, France, and Germany) appears possible. However, this would require Russian demands to be met. Such demands include the U.S. sanctioning of the annexation of Crimea and the "autonomy" of Donbas, and a solution to the Syrian crisis in line with Russia's aspirations.

Putin, and his international projects, can be encouraged by possible and ongoing political changes in the United States, Germany and France, which would lead to increased uncertainty in international relations. A domestically consolidated Russia will continue to try to have a negative impact on U.S. and EU diplomacy, leading an aggressive policy in Ukraine, Syria and the border regions of Russia and NATO (Scandinavia, the Baltic Sea, and the Black Sea).