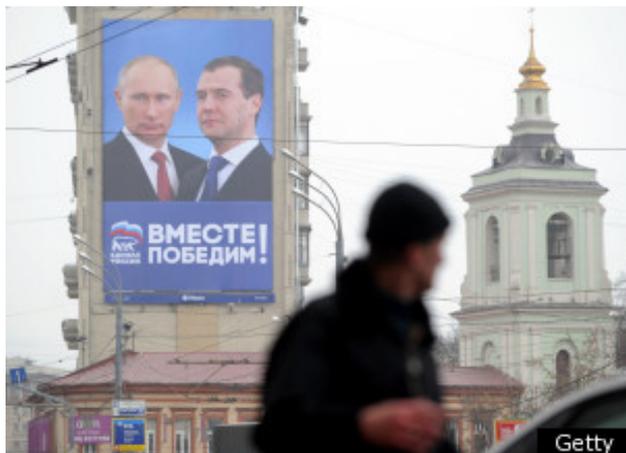


Russia united – for the time being (Part II)

Written by Эрик Уолберг (Eric Walberg)
Thursday, 15 December 2011 02:34



Russia's parliamentary elections have sparked a political crisis, surprising everyone, from President Putin (excuse me, Medvedev) down, including the demonstrators themselves, marvels Eric Walberg

Tahrir Square continues to send out its beacon of light. Thousands of Russian riot police were deployed in Red Square to prevent it from being turned into another Tahrir last Saturday, when demonstrators, without any resources except cell phones and fur-lined winter coats, pulled off the largest uprising since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, in 60 Russian cities, across nine time zones, with at least one repeat performance scheduled for 24 December.

The uprising united the usually fractious liberals, nationalists and Communists, with slogans "Swindlers and Thieves!", "Russia without Putin!" and "Churov Resign!" – references to United Russia (UR) and election commission chief Vladimir Churov. Russian expats in more than 20 countries also demonstrated in a show of solidarity outside embassies and consulates.

To date under Putin, rallies have been forbidden or limited to a few hundred. Unauthorised attempts bring beatings and arrests. But most of Saturday's protests had official sanction; Moscow officials authorised a crowd of 30,000 and did not send riot police into action when 40,000 turned up, and the follow-up rally has been authorised for 50,000.

This new embrace of Western norms indicates that Putin is deeply concerned about his weakened position. 42 per cent of Russians in September said they would vote for Putin in the presidential election, but only 31 per cent by November. And that was before the 4 December debacle. Whether this new leniency shows yet another face for the inscrutable autocrat, or is a nod to advisers, who warn that a harsh crackdown could threaten the wobbly "Restart" button and even the precious 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, is a good question.

If the latter, this would be an especially cruel irony, as the last Russian Olympics in 1980 were boycotted by the West because of Soviet actions in Afghanistan, signalling the beginning of the end of that version of the Russian bear. Just as the Soviet Union let itself be seduced by Western human rights talk resulting in the Helsinki Accords in 1975, which became a weapon in clever Western hands, so Putin et al are forced to hold their noses (or plug their ears) faced with noisy, persistent protests if the Sochi Olympics are to be a successful showcase for the new

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Russia.

Uncharacteristically ploddingly, Putin charged Western interference: “They heard the signal and with the support of the US State Department began active work.” It was the protesters who showed wit and resourcefulness this time: “Are we here because Hillary Clinton texted us?” Some protesters carried badminton rackets, a reference to Putin and Medvedev’s squeaky-clean sportiness. A riot police officer was photographed holding a white flower, a symbol of the protest, behind his back.

The fact is there was blatant vote rigging in some areas. This was documented, especially in Moscow, central Russia and the North Caucasus. The FOM (Fund for Social Opinion) exit poll, the most comprehensive in Russia, estimated the UR vote in Moscow at 23.6 per cent, a full 23 per cent less than the official results. Similarly in the Caucasus, there was a difference of 20.8 per cent, and in Russia as a whole a gap of 6.3 per cent between official and exit polls. FOM’s regional breakdown was mysteriously removed from the FOM site, but not before it was saved by enough observers to verify its authenticity.

The North Caucasus is dominated by local clans who are part of the power structure, so vote rigging is to be expected. But fiddling with the vote in Moscow and other large cities, where an independent-minded middle class has the latest in communications gadgets is no longer acceptable. People were observed voting in a “carousel”, taking a bus to vote up to 15 times at separate polling stations. One voter was told that if he voted for Putin’s party, there was a present waiting for him outside the booth, a bottle of vodka and plastic cups inside a plastic bag. Moscow voting stations with electronic voting machines, which are hard to mess with, reported 30 per cent for UR vs the 46.6 per cent average. Communist headquarters received thousands of calls from regional offices about ballot-box stuffing and other violations. A flustered President Dmitri Medvedev finally agreed to ordered an investigation into reports of election fraud, according to his Facebook page.

It appears the fraud was indeed necessary to preserve UR’s majority, but unfortunately for UR, it was more that the 1-2 per cent that is the upper limit of acceptable fraud in close elections in, say, the US (remember Ohio’s cliffhanger vote in 2004, with a Republican controlling the voting and a Republican company providing the notorious voting machines, that gave George W Bush just enough extra votes to steal the election from John Kerry?). Or the 2006 Mexican presidential election, which almost all observers acknowledged should have gone to the socialist Obrador?

What Russians are now living through is the neoliberal version of democracy which Russia adopted after 1991, better described as polyarchy, where factions of the ruling elite allow for some cosmetic change of faces, but where elections are controlled by the corporatised state and commented on by the corporatised media, all in league. When a populist (or even a Kerry) tries to buck this formidable machine and his support approaches a danger zone, the necessary stops can be pulled, allowing an illusion of “almost” victory for the underdog but keeping the system in tact.

Of course, the corruption charge is not just about stuffing boxes or bribing voters. It is about the

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entire post-Soviet economic and political structure, the result of massive economic theft of state resources and widespread official corruption, resulting in personal dynasties where the 22-year-old niece of the governor of Krasnodar owns a major stake in a massive pipe factory, poultry plant and other businesses, and the 18-year-old daughter of the governor of Sverdlovsk owns a plywood mill and a dozen other local businesses. “How does all this wonderful entrepreneurial talent appear only in the children of United Russia members?” asks rising opposition star Alexei Navalny.

What about claims of Western interference? Of course. Opposition leader Vladimir Ryzhkov’s World Movement for Democracy (WMD) is a veritable franchise of the National Endowment of Democracy’s WMD. Opposition stars recently attended the NED-funded seminar “Elections in Russia: Polling and Perspectives” along with sundry Soros groupies and USAIDers. Navalny is a co-founder of the NED-funded DA! (Democratic Alternative) activist movement, as stated in his Yale World Fellows bio.

But it is far worse in, for example, Egypt, where US aid has gone and continues to go to both sides -- Mubarak/ the army and democracy activists -- just in case. But even here, US interference can backfire. It is no secret that Egyptian revolutionaries were trained and inspired by Colour Revolutionaries from Serbia and American pacifist legend Gene Sharp. That in itself is not a sin, nor are all recipients traitors. Western media/ election-savvy young people mustering all the latest technology and strategies and precipitated the toppling of their dictators. Who can possibly deny this was a good thing? And now disaffected Russians and even Americans themselves are taking inspiration from their Arab fellow-dispossessed. Wow.

Besides, the Russian state has full access to all the gadgets and pamphlets and is quite good at hacking computers and devising counter-strategies, and if all else fails, beating up and arresting (and possibly worse) gadflies who dare to defy authority. All’s fair in love and war.

But at the same time, whether or not Hillary’s twitters inspired the Russian unrest, it is clearly in America’s interest is to keep Russia weak, and encouraging political unrest is the perfect vehicle. Russia’s defiance on Western plans to invade Syria and Iran infuriates Washington. Washington gambles that “democracy” will bring its flunkies to power in the Kremlin, just as it hopes that pro-US Arab liberals can be put into power with a little scheming. Very risky politics, but this is clearly what’s going on, and NED is doing its part, as it did throughout eastern Europe in the 1990s. Putin has a point.

Protest organisers met on Sunday, trying to pull together some sort of leadership council. It is most unlikely, even if a few recounts are allowed, that UR will lose its majority, but the momentum of the demonstrations will make the presidential campaign in February very heated. Putin will now face at least four serious candidates: charismatic billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, the perennial Communist Gennady Zyuganov, Sergei Mironov of the Just Russia Party, and rising star Navalny.

Those elections will be much harder to falsify with box-stuffing and vodka payoffs, and Putin will most certainly face a runoff. Again, it is unlikely that he will lose to the corrupt playboy oligarch, the dour Communist, the ex-Putin groupie who ran as token opposition to Mr UR in 2004, or the

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35-year-old black sheep of the Yabloko Party, who was kicked out for racist threats. But he will have a rough ride.

The up side of this electoral tempest is that Russian politics has come back to life. Russians are taking electoral politics seriously, and new parties are in the works as the UR begins to unravel. The new middle class that Putin's decade of one-man rule produced is on the march, much like in Pinochet's Chile, where a new middle class also rose up against the strongman to demand their political rights. If Putin is a true statesman, he will see the writing on the wall, seize the opportunity to entrench honest elections, and retire early, leaving a legacy as important as his role in saving Russia from the predatory neoliberals a decade ago.

Egypt's uprising, too, started not with the starving peasants (though they soon joined in). The result, which is still in process, despite much turmoil and many setbacks, is probably the freest election in modern history anywhere, as the corporatised Egyptian state, with its control of the media and elections, was pushed aside. This allowed what was, until a few short months ago, the illegal opposition -- the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis -- to gain a constitutional majority virtually overnight, much like in Russia in 1917.

Russians, too, want to know that their dysfunctional state apparatus can be successfully challenged, so that real elections can take place. And how long will it be before Americans see the light and push their dysfunctional state apparatus aside and enjoy the "democracy" that the NED and Soros croon so beautifully about?