

RUSSIA POST MARCH 4, 2012: ELECTIONS ARE OVER BUT QUESTIONS REMAIN

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Russian elections brought little surprise. The biggest intrigue was not who would win for no sane person either in Russia or abroad doubted that Vladimir Putin would return to the Kremlin. What caused the debates, however, was whether he would make it in one round or two. As it is now well-known, the official results of the March 4 vote gave Mr. Putin an indisputable victory in the first round. What does this mean for Russian foreign policy and for its world partners?

Setting the Scene

Mr. Putin was quite clear in outlining his foreign policy visions (as well as his views on other aspects of politics) in the run-up to the elections. His article in *Moskovskie Novosti* on February 27 was dominated by three ideas.

First, Russia will continue to act as one of the key powers and to defend this status which is based on its geography, history and current might. It means that Russia will strive to participate in all major decisions affecting the world including security. It also implies that Moscow will promote the value of sovereignty – the way it interprets it, which inter alia means that external partners have no right to interfere in domestic affairs of any country even if its domestic groups are in conflict. This point is further reinforced with the thesis about equal security for all states.

Second, Russian foreign policy is driven predominantly by economic rational. For example, Mr. Putin stresses that he intends to do everything possible 'to see that Russia enjoys the latest achievements in scientific and technical progress and to assist our entrepreneurs in occupying their rightful place in the world market'. He further emphasizes the need to improve the economic agenda of US-Russian relations, underlines that China presents a challenge because of its "colossal potential for business cooperation". Most importantly, he suggests that Russia and the EU would construct a Union of Europe based on three pillars: a free trade area and possibly a more advanced form of cooperation, a common energy complex and a visa-free travel space. Finally, he highlighted the importance of the WTO.

Third, Russian foreign policy will increasingly draw on soft power instruments. Mr. Putin stresses that the methods which are currently used in this domain frequently 'provoke extremist, separatist and nationalistic attitudes' and 'manipulate the public'. That does not mean that Russia denies this part of relations, rather Moscow will strive to do it 'its way',

meaning to promote constructively Russian cultural heritage, its education and language.

Is the Scene New?

Does it sound new? Well, not really. The basic message is that Russia's foreign policy will remain pretty much the way it is, little will change in this domain from a substantial point of view. In fact, the presidency of Mr. Medvedev is remarkable in the continuity of what Mr. Putin set during his first terms in office (2000-2008). Mr. Medvedev was probably less noticeable for harsh anti-Western statements but he pretty much furthered the course set up earlier and based on the promotion of Russia's great power status, on the one hand, and its economic interests, on the other hand, (including those, being anchored in Europe).

Due to the emphasis on the economic part (WTO-accession negotiations, modernisation rhetoric) and the promotion of the political vision by liberal initiatives (the one on new security architecture is probably the most famous) Mr. Medvedev was seen at times as more liberal and technocratic. However, the essence and the pursued goals were pretty much the same. Hence, the scene of Russian foreign policy is not new, and, therefore, there should be no worries about the continuation of most of Mr. Medvedev's initiatives (including that of modernisation).

What is different, however, is what is going behind the scene, i.e., the domestic situation. And this is something that went through the profound transformation during the election period between autumn 2011 and March 2012. All of a sudden, even for the majority of the Russians, the civil society woke up, the civil society which is not happy with the only option suggested. A wide protest movement united representatives of various views, different strata of the society, and made its way to the streets. It was remarkably peaceful and at the same time full of energy and spirit for reform.

One should be careful about its aims and views though. The positive agenda which unites all the groups is fairly small. It includes free and honest elections (with real alternatives), the rule of law and the end of corruption which destroys all segments of the state. Apart from these three things little brings protestors together. But it seems that most of them took the challenge of formulating the positive agenda and are currently doing their best to pursue this goal. Hence, the quietness of today is deceiving; it's the quietness before the storm.

A substantial part of the society strives for change. The majority of those are young people who grew up after the end of the Soviet period, and therefore, are deprived of 'the gene of fear' which still characterizes the older generation. Mr. Putin and his team will have to react to this social demand and will have to deal at least with corruption and with the absence of the rule of law. The problematic aspect for the incoming

master of the Kremlin is that a considerable part of his electorate voted for what was termed stability, i.e., for the absence of change. Another dilemma is that he will have to bring new people to key positions, but he will also have to find what to do with those who have been for a number of years on his team. In other words, the key task is to tip the balance between those who would like to see change and those who would like to maintain the status quo. In sum, there is an impressive dynamism behind the scene. This energy is in the nuclei now but it is bound to become mechanic soon.

What Does It Mean for the Audience in Europe?

The battle which will unroll will not be about foreign policy. For all the present dynamics and internal conflicts in Russia there is a remarkable consensus about the essence of its foreign policy in particular about the need to defend by all means its great power status and a place at the table where key decisions are taken, on the one hand, and the need to maximize the economic return of it, do to the most of trade and investment, on the other hand. From a geographical point of view, the deeply embedded view is that Russia culturally belongs to Europe but also that increasingly the opportunities for trade, investment and cooperation, which spur economic growth, are located in Asia.

Given this consensus as well as the fact that current debates are not strictly about democracy but about a part of it (elections), as well as about the rule of law and corruption, there is little chance that the efforts of external partners to interfere in this debate will fall on rich soil. On the contrary, Mr. Putin's rhetoric during the election period and right after it gives ground to suspect that he would counter any effort like this with sovereignty claims, that he will use it to postpone uneasy changes and to delegitimize those who demand transformation. He already alluded to the sponsorship of the demonstrations by the Department of State, and he is likely to use the very same argument in the future.

What should be continued and enhanced, however, is pragmatic – mainly economic – cooperation with the West including the EU. Its advantages are numerous. First, it is mutually beneficial to overcome the consequences of the crisis and to set up a firmer basis for deepening of economic relations. Moreover, it brings affluence to people, and this affluence normally goes hand-by-hand with the wish to exercise political freedoms as well. Second, and most importantly, it broadens the interaction among various Russian citizens and the West, and thus exposes the former to the values and advantages of the rule of law, human rights and democracy. Yet it prevents any speculations about the interference in the domestic affairs of Russia. It will therefore stop short of discrediting the forces which strive for change.

The transformation which started behind the scenes will not materialize immediately. It will take time and enormous effort on the side of the state and on that of the society. It will be of the evolution type because nobody is looking for a revolution and abrupt change. It will be painful but necessary for the sustainable development of the country in the future but also for it maintaining and enhancing its position in the world. The priorities in the world arena will hardly change, rather we will see the redefinition of the ways in which they are pursued. And, very likely, they will also be met differently by our partners in the West, including, in particular, those in Europe.