

Research Paper

Richard Sakwa

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# Whatever Happened to the Russian Opposition?

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# Summary

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- The eruption of popular protest in 2011 reflected the broader permanent clash between the legality, procedures and institutions associated with the constitutional state and the neo-patrimonial features of the administrative regime. The popular movement sought to strengthen the constitutional state and reduce the administrative interference of the regime, but with a fundamental division of views about the capacity of the Russian constitutional order for reform and renewal.
- The regime response balanced repression with concession. On the one side, a range of repressive legislation was adopted and the 'Bolotnaya' protesters faced prosecution and defamation in the media. On the other side, registration of political parties and the procedure to get onto the ballot paper were made easier. This stimulated a great deal of grassroots activity and there were clear incentives to participate in elections, especially at the municipal level.
- The Ukrainian crisis has intensified regime insecurities and the hard-liners have intensified vigilance to interdict what they see as Western-supported 'democracy promotion' measures designed to achieve regime change. In this context, hard-line opposition will only encourage the hard-liners within the regime, whereas an alliance of regime soft-liners and the 'constructive' opposition offers Russia a unique opportunity for evolutionary change.

## Introduction

The protest movement from late 2011 in Russia was the most sustained and politically significant popular mobilization in the Putin era.<sup>1</sup> Not only were its scale and reach impressive, but its overtly political demands – for the regime to obey its own laws, for elections to be free and fair, and ultimately for an end to the highly personalized system of rule focused on Vladimir Putin – were unprecedented. Tens of thousands marched in the streets of Moscow and over a hundred other locations. However, with Vladimir Putin back in the Kremlin from May 2012, the movement began to decline. With the movement lacking clear leadership or a coherently articulated positive programme, the tide turned back in the regime's favour, helped by a range of concessions, some targeted coercion and a more militant foreign policy. However, a permanent legacy remains. The opposition had long been denigrated as marginal, but the protest movement illustrated the potential for rapid mobilization against the regime. The idea of opposition was rehabilitated. Although the movement remains fragmented and incoherent, Russia's rulers now have to reckon with the potential for mass anti-systemic mobilization, even though they have been unable to accept the legitimacy of autonomous critical activity leading to government change. The experience of the Arab Spring and, even closer to home, the overthrow of an unpopular and incompetent ruler in Ukraine in February 2014 act as a salutary warning about what can happen when a regime remains in power for too long and the system fails to adapt to societal change and popular aspirations.

The first section of this paper provides a brief overview of the theoretical conceptualization of Russian politics that frames the study. The second section looks at the outbreak of contentious politics protesting against Putin's return and electoral malpractices in 2011–12. This cycle of protest politics has acquired the moniker 'Bolotnaya', taken from the square on the island in the Moscow River opposite the Kremlin where the most significant events of the movement took place. The term in official discourse has a pejorative connotation, since the word is derived from *boloto*, meaning marsh or bog, yet the appellation more generally has acquired a more neutral meaning to represent popular democratic mobilization. The third section reviews the legacy of the Bolotnaya movement, noting that it brought new leaders to prominence and generated new forms of political coordination. This includes a new generation of 'elite opposition', exploiting the open-endedness of the situation to establish a line of intra-systemic reform. The fourth section looks at the regime's responses, noting that some of the opposition's demands were incorporated to modify the regime's practices of political management. The fifth part looks at how opposition organization has changed in response to the new conditions, above all taking advantage of the liberalization of the law on party formation and changes in electoral legislation. This section also assesses perspectives for the future, including the impact of the 'Ukrainian revolution' on Russian domestic politics. In February 2014 the legitimately elected, although corrupt and authoritarian, President Viktor Yanukovich was overthrown. In Russia the regime's 'orange-phobia', as after the Orange revolution of 2004, once again provoked a clampdown on civil associations, media diversity and opposition in general amid a wave of nationalism and exultation about the return of Crimea to Russian jurisdiction. The paper concludes that the dualism of the system continues and that the situation in Russia has not yet come to crisis point, although there are accumulating political contradictions that will be exacerbated by economic stagnation and international isolation.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper develops arguments in Richard Sakwa, *Putin Redux: Power and Contradiction in Contemporary Russia* (London & New York: Routledge, 2014).

## Dualism, the situation and opposition

The eruption of popular protest exposed the contradictions between the two wings of the 'dual state'. The gulf between the constitutional state on the one hand, with its associated parliamentary, representative and judicial institutions, and on the other hand the manipulative practices of the administrative regime that interfered above all in the electoral process, was starkly revealed. This reflected the broader permanent clash between two political orders: the legality, procedures and institutions associated with the constitutional state, and the neo-patrimonial features of the administrative regime.<sup>2</sup>

Russian politics is characterized by the dominance of a powerful yet diffuse administrative regime, recognizing its subordination to the normative state on the one side and its formal accountability to the institutions of mass representative democracy on the other. However, it is not effectively constrained by either, hence the 'regime' character of the dominant power system. It is also for this reason that it would be an exaggeration to suggest that a full-blown authoritarian system has been consolidated, ruling through emergency decrees and sustained repression. Instead, there is informal behaviour by an administrative regime that fulfils some of the functions of an authoritarian state but has no independent legal or institutional status of its own. The administrative regime is not only a network of social relations, in which political and economic power are entwined in a shifting landscape of factional politics, but it also functions as an actor in the political process.

The rule of law in Russia remains fragile and is susceptible to manipulation by the political authorities, but neither has a fully-fledged authoritarian state emerged. Thus Russia remains trapped in the grey area between an administrative and a genuine constitutional state. The interaction between the constitutional (legal-rational) and administrative (neo-patrimonial) state has become the defining feature of the current political order in Russia. The dynamic tension between them precludes assigning Russia simply to the camp of authoritarian states, but it also means that Russia's democracy is flawed, above all because of abuses in the rule of law and the lack of political competition conducted on a level playing field. It is for this reason that as the country entered the 2011–12 electoral cycle there were demands, including from leading ministers (notably Alexei Kudrin, finance minister from 2000 to 2011), for the elections to be held in a free and fair manner.<sup>3</sup>

Dualism endows Russia with the features of systemic stalemate. By definition, the dual state cannot become institutionalized. Although it is hybrid in its very essence, it is not a 'regime type' in the classical terms understood in political science. Instead, it is what Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan call a 'situation', a condition of impermanence, however long it may last.<sup>4</sup> Thus the Putinite stability is unstable in its very essence. There can be achievements, such as the Sochi Olympics, infrastructural development like the 'Moscow City' financial centre, and elements of modernization, but until the regime question is resolved the whole system remains 'provisional', even if it lasts for decades. This does not mean that Russia today does not have legitimate great-power interests, geopolitical concerns,

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<sup>2</sup> See Richard Sakwa, 'The Dual State in Russia', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 26, No. 3, July–September 2010, pp. 185–206; *ibid.*, *The Crisis of Russian Democracy: The Dual State, Factionalism and the Medvedev Succession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Brian Whitmore, 'Kudrin vs. United Russia', RFE/RL, Russia Report, 21 February 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Stepan and Juan J. Linz, 'Democratization Theory and the "Arab Spring"', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 24, No. 2, April 2013, p. 20.

potentially viable integrative projects or civilizational identity. However, the Russian 'situation' means that no sustained and enduring consolidation can take place, and instead the future remains open. Contesting visions of Russia's destiny inspire the opposition and at the same time rally support for the regime. Fear of systemic change, and of the possibility of attendant chaos in which the gains of the Putin era are squandered, is balanced by concern that stability can degenerate into stagnation. Fear that the future is foreclosed inspires many to emigrate and others to protest. The indeterminacy of the 'situation' means that the contradictions of the system generate oppositional activity and sentiments.

Whatever its immediate fate, as long as the 'situation' endures, there will be an 'opposition' that is not confined to parliament and has popular mobilizational potential. It is at this point that the question of tactics becomes crucial. Although much of the post-communist transitological literature has, quite rightly, been criticized for its narrow character, some of its fundamental insights retain their analytical power. This applies above all to the idea that division within the regime between hard- and soft-liners is reproduced in the opposition. The classic literature on comparative democratization suggests that when the soft-liners in both camps find a common language, then a pacted transition is feasible.<sup>5</sup> This is very much the case in Russia. The dualism of the system means that the regime soft-liners, often dubbed the *civiliki*, have an institutional framework in which to operate, condemn 'legal nihilism' and push for a more open and competitive political system; while the soft-liners in the opposition can exploit the porosity of the system to build oppositional movements and parties, and test the limits of electoral pluralism. Such an alliance would create the potential for an evolutionary transcendence of the 'situation' to allow the constitutional state to become consolidated. However, the regime hard-liners (conventionally labelled the *siloviki*, those aligned with the security service apparatus and its ideology) prioritize the threats to the system at home and abroad, and intensify coercion against civil and political associations. This only reinforces the view of the opposition hard-liners that the administrative regime will not relinquish its hold on power, and thus confirms them in their view that the regime lacks evolutionary potential and is, sooner or later, doomed. It is within this matrix that the fate of the Russian opposition can now be examined.

### From marsh to mountain

The protests against the flawed parliamentary elections of 4 December 2011 and the presidential elections of 4 March 2012 began with dynamism and élan. Already on 5 December up to 10,000 protesters gathered on Chistoprudny Boulevard in Moscow to condemn fraud in the ballot to the State Duma. The protests thereafter gathered pace, with the first of the large demonstrations taking place on 10 December in Bolotnaya Square, with up to 80,000 participating. The white ribbon became the symbol of peaceful democratic change. The movement peaked on 24 December, when some 100,000 people gathered on Sakharov Prospect.<sup>6</sup> The demonstrators displayed a range of inventively witty but scathing placards and banners condemning the practices of 'managed democracy'. They were watched over by a large but passive police presence. The sheer scale of the protests forced the government to compromise.

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<sup>5</sup> Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> The precise figures are greatly disputed, with the police giving considerably lower numbers and the protest leaders higher ones – as with most Western demonstrations. The figures given here reflect the rough consensus.

It was clear that the authorities were surprised by the scale of the mobilization. After all, it was not the first time that elections in the Putin era had been manipulated to suit the regime. This occasion was different for several reasons, but top of the list was the brazen way in which the ‘castling’ (*rokirovka*) move had taken place on 24 September. The congress of the dominant United Russia party was told that Putin would once again stand for the presidency, while the incumbent since 2008, Dmitry Medvedev, would be nominated as prime minister. What made things worse was the assertion that this had been agreed from the beginning, when Medvedev had been put forward to take over from Putin, who was limited by the constitution to two consecutive terms. If this was indeed the case, then the four years of Medvedev’s presidency were no more than a farce. The emphasis both leaders placed on the planned nature of Putin’s return in fact belied the rather more confused and spontaneous way in which the whole operation was implemented. Medvedev had clearly entertained hopes of a second term, and some senior Russian politicians supported the idea. In the event, the move represented a personal humiliation, since it suggested that Medvedev was not to be trusted to run the country again. The accompanying rhetoric – that the two had from the first decided on the ‘castling’ move – was an insult to the rest of the country.

When the plan was implemented through manipulated elections, it was clear that tolerance of administrative interference had reached breaking point. Society had matured, in part as a result of the long Putinite stability, and a new class had emerged demanding its citizenship rights. Its description as a ‘middle class’ is misleading since many of the students and young people involved could hardly be described as such in either income or status terms. Another designation current at the time was to assign the protests to the ‘creative class’, those not tied to the bureaucracy or some other ‘service’ group. Vladislav Surkov, who until December 2011 was the deputy head of the Presidential Administration responsible for political management, called them ‘angry urbanites’, and unexpectedly indicated a degree of sympathy with their aims. In the light of Medvedev’s announcement of a range of political reforms in his state-of-the-nation speech on 22 December (discussed below), Surkov insisted that ‘political changes are not coming; they have arrived. The system has already changed [...] To grant the sensible demands of the active part of society is not a forced manoeuvre by the authorities but their obligation and constitutional duty.’ When asked about his ‘conservatism’, Surkov asked ‘And what are we preserving? Who wants to defend corruption and injustice? Who wants to defend a dumb and stupid system?’ The ‘moral high ground’ that the authorities had enjoyed for so long had to be regained, and he said he hoped that ‘the street would quieten down and the reforms take place’.<sup>7</sup> This was the classic voice of the intra-systemic soft-liner, ready to embrace change.

At the Sakharov Prospect demonstration a wide spectrum of opposition leaders addressed the crowd. The main slogan was ‘Russia without Putin’, while placards with the words ‘Putin is a thief’ were prevalent, accompanied once again by a range of striking posters. Kudrin, the long-time finance minister who had resigned two days after the *rokirovka* in protest against the diversion of resources into military spending (and possibly in disappointment at not being nominated prime minister) had long been calling for free and fair elections, and now he joined the tribune to call for a re-run of the 4 December poll. While Kudrin may have been ambivalent about attacks on his friend Putin, he endorsed the demand for a re-run of the elections and the dismissal of the head of the

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<sup>7</sup> Elena Shishkunova, ‘Vladislav Surkov: “Sistema uzhe izmenilas”’, [‘Vladislav Surkov: “The system has already changed”’], *Izvestiya*, 22 December 2011.

Central Electoral Commission, Vladimir Churov. Kudrin called on the demonstrators ‘to organize a platform for dialogue’, including with the authorities. ‘Otherwise it is revolution, and we will lose the chance that is before us today – peaceful transformation and the trust that is necessary for a new ruling power to be created’. He also noted that steps had already been taken to create a new party in order to help consolidate the liberalizing reforms when they came to be implemented, although in the event he created a think-tank rather than a party. His stance revealed signs of intra-elite splits. Democratization theory tells us that this is the most dangerous time for an old regime, when a democratic breakthrough becomes possible. A pact was in the making, but in the end Putin refused to engage in formal dialogue with the opposition. The political concessions retained an administrative character that voided them of much of their creative political potential.

The protest movement brought together an eclectic mix of concerns. Although liberal issues were prominent, a large contingent of the demonstrators was made up of nationalists protesting against Putin’s apparent lack of concern for the Russian ethnic majority.<sup>8</sup> They claimed that the authorities have failed to establish an effective system to manage labour migration from Central Asia and the Caucasus, and thus that Russia would be better off without the North Caucasus, and that Tajiks and others should be chased out of the big cities. If earlier mobilizations focused on economic and social demands, provoked by poverty and decline, the new concerns focused on problems associated with growth, above all equity, rights and justice.<sup>9</sup> It is for this reason that Valerii Panyushkin has talked of a ‘revolution of consumers’. Just as consumers fight to ensure quality and reliability in the consumer sphere, so as citizens they now shifted their attention to another arena where they were being mercilessly cheated – politics.<sup>10</sup>

The scale, degree of coordination and substantive political demands of the oppositional tide shook the Kremlin, but they were not unprecedented.<sup>11</sup> Protest and civil activism were nothing new in the Putin era. The monetization of social benefits had provoked a wave of protest in early 2005, with a large number of pensioners and others from the ‘dependent’ classes taking to the streets across the country. In the wake of the economic crisis from 2008, street meetings peaked in 2009 as demonstrators across the country protested against social and economic problems. In January 2010, up to 12,000 protesters in Kaliningrad called on Putin to resign as prime minister. The immediate spark was a planned increase in the regional transport tax, but this demonstration and some smaller ones elsewhere signalled growing frustration.<sup>12</sup> At the time of the wildfires in summer 2010 large numbers of volunteers made up for the deficiencies of the authorities. At that time the ‘blue buckets’ movement mocked officials who sped by with their blue lamps flashing, while ordinary motorists remained locked in worsening traffic jams. Already motorists had mobilized against the ban on the importation of second-hand right-hand drive cars, notably in Vladivostok in December 2007, and the persecution of motorists in collision with official motorcades.

According to Levada Centre surveys, the protest movement initially was overwhelmingly young and middle-class. Of those who marched on 24 December 2011, 62 per cent had university degrees or higher, a quarter were aged below 25 and over half were under 40; almost half were professionals,

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8 Nicu Popescu, ‘The Strange Alliance of Democrats and Nationalists’, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 23, No. 3, July 2012, pp. 46–54.

9 Graeme B. Robertson, ‘Protesting Putinism: The Election Protests of 2011–2012 in Broader Perspective’, *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 60, No. 2, March–April 2013.

10 Valerii Panyushkin, *Vosstanie potrebitelei [A Revolution of Consumers]* (Moscow: Astrel, 2012), p. 249.

11 For a study of early movements, see Graeme B. Robertson, *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes: Managing Dissent in Post-Communist Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

12 Alexandra Odynova, ‘Thousands decry Putin as public anger wells’, *Moscow Times*, 1 February 2010.

and almost a quarter were either managers or owned a business; while 12 per cent were college students, the third largest group. The overwhelming majority, some 70 per cent, considered themselves 'democrats' or liberals', while a plurality supported Yabloko, the 'party of the intelligentsia'.<sup>13</sup> At the time, Alexei Levinson of the Levada Centre argued that it was misleading to emphasize the movement's middle-class character. Research by the centre found that, although plenty of middle-class people participated, there were also many poor people, pensioners and students. Levinson condemned the class approach to the question, warning the regime of attempts to mobilize the working class from the provinces (notably, the Urals) against the metropolitan demonstrators. He insisted that 'It was not the middle class who protested. Society as a whole sent out its heralds to say that they wished to live differently.'<sup>14</sup>

The demonstration on 4 February in Bolotnaya Square once again assembled some 100,000 people. The whole spectrum of the anti-systemic opposition was on view, divided not only ideologically but also generationally. The old guard democrats, such as Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Ryzhkov, were overshadowed by the new radicals, such as the blogger and anti-corruption campaigner Alexei Navalny and the coordinator of Left Front, Sergei Udaltsov. They in turn were overshadowed by a counter-rally that day on Poklonnaya Hill, with some 140,000 participants, intended to define and activate core voters by weaving together patriotic and traditionalist symbolism.<sup>15</sup> The demonstration also served as a warning that once Russia mobilized, the liberals would find themselves in a minority. Only few liberals were ready to recognize that ultimately Putin was a compromise figure, and held at bay the real power of Russian *revanchism*. His ability to maintain a balance in policy positions as well as a consensus among Russian elites reinforced the arguments of his supporters that there was no positive alternative to his leadership. With the Medvedev option discredited and the autonomous development of political parties stymied, the argument became self-reinforcing.

Putin was duly re-elected on 4 March, and on the eve of his inauguration, on 6 May, a protest march to Bolotnaya Square ended in disorder, with at least 400 people detained. The authorities had changed tactics, sensing that the tide had turned in their favour. Over 12,800 police officers were involved, some flown in from as far away as Mari El and Yakutia. Marchers were forced into a bottleneck, which provoked violence.<sup>16</sup> In the end 28 defendants were charged with organizing and participating in the 'mass riot'.<sup>17</sup> The next day Putin drove through eerily deserted streets to receive Monomakh's Cap, the symbol of Russian leadership, in the Kremlin. In his inauguration speech Putin recognized that the country was 'entering a new stage of national development', but argued that its goals would only be achieved 'if we are one and united'.<sup>18</sup>

The protest movement can be understood in numerous ways. The liberal view argues that it reflected dissatisfaction with the general sense of stagnation and the need for political reform. From

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13 See Levada Centre poll results at [www.levada.ru/26-12-2011/opros-na-prospekte-sakharova-24-dekabrya](http://www.levada.ru/26-12-2011/opros-na-prospekte-sakharova-24-dekabrya). For a detailed analysis, see Denis Volkov, 'The Protesters and the Public', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 23, No. 3, July 2012.

14 Aleksei Levinson, 'Eto ne srednii klass – eto vse' [It's not the middle class – it's everyone], *Vedomosti*, 21 February 2012.

15 Regina Smyth, Anton Sobolev and Irina Soboleva, 'A Well-Organised Play: Symbolic Politics and the Effect of the Pro-Putin Rallies', *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 60, No. 2, March–April 2013.

16 Doklad Komissii "Krugloga stola 12 dekabrya" po obshchestvennomu rassledovaniyu sobytiy 6 maya 2012 goda na Bolotnoe ploshchadii; [Report of the '12 December roundtable' committee on the public inquiry into the events on Bolotnaya Square on 6 May], <http://rt12dec.ru/documents/report220413/default.html>.

17 Vladimir Ryzhkov, 'Putin's Bolotnoye show trial', *Moscow Times*, 25 April 2013.

18 'Vladimir Putin vstupil v dolzhnost' Prezidenta Rossii', [Vladimir Putin took the oath of office], 7 May 2012, <http://news.kremlin.ru/transcripts/15224>.



this perspective, electoral fraud (as it was in all colour revolutions) was the catalyst that brought the simmering dissatisfaction with the Putinite system of regime rule to the boil. Medvedev had long advocated reform, but had been stymied at every turn by those arguing that there was no need for change. The ethical perspective is suggested by Leon Aron, who stresses the moral character of the movement. On the basis of a philosophy of non-violence, he argues that like other movements for civil rights the ‘system’ was rejected ‘less because of specific political or economic grievances but because its members find that system offensive and beneath them as people and citizens’.<sup>19</sup> For Aron, the movement was a struggle of the ‘middle class’ against corruption and electoral fraud and for dignity and competent consumerism. However, in calling for regime change there was enormous potential for violence. As in his earlier study of Gorbachev’s reforms,<sup>20</sup> there is no sense of *politics*; the agonistic or dialogical attempt to deal with difficult issues of policy as well as process, or how to define the limits of the nation or the political community. Aron posits two monoliths – the power system and the people – whereas both are highly fragmented; separated not only into soft- and hard-liners, but also by factional pluralism and clientelism.

## Opposition and regime

Studies at this time revealed that 38 per cent of Russians had little hope for their future, a sense of failure that was marked in small towns with a population under 20,000.<sup>21</sup> There had also been institutional decay, with a degradation of some of the institutions of modernity, such as the courts, the security and police apparatus, and the educational system. Property rights had become less secure, while the instruments of democratic governance had been hollowed out. Putin’s leadership sought to depoliticize governance and to render it the preserve of a special elite, the administrative regime, vouchsafed with a privileged relationship to deciding what was in Russia’s national interest. The tutelary system stood outside of the constitutional state and the institutions of political democracy. The slogan ‘Give us back our country’ reflected the perception that the tutelary regime had arrogated to itself the sovereignty that properly belonged to the people. The opposition challenges this postulate and demands the re-establishment of a political process that would be at once more pluralistic and competitive. In other words, the fundamental demand is for the return of politics. The regime responds by reasserting its tutelary prerogatives, and by denying the progressive content of oppositional activity.

The classic themes of Russia’s binary political culture may well come into play, but more immediate concerns shape the interactions between the regime and the opposition. Aron’s idealistic portrayal of a simple contrast between regime and society obscures the highly fragmented nature of the opposition itself. The opposition lacks a clear leader or forward-looking programme. The ‘systemic’ parties, i.e. those that are allowed to participate in the formal political process, played little part in organizing the demonstrations in 2011–12 and can be considered part of the ‘loyal opposition’. Of the seven parties that participated in the December 2011 parliamentary ballot, only four won Duma seats – the regime’s pedestal party United Russia, the eternally unreformed Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) and Just

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<sup>19</sup> Leon Aron, ‘The Long Struggle for Freedom’, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 24, No. 3, July 2013, p. 63.

<sup>20</sup> Leon Aron, *Roads to the Temple: Truth, Memory, Ideas, and Ideals in the Making of the Russian Revolution, 1987-1991* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Nataliya Zubarevich, ‘Chetyre Rossii’ [The Four Russias], *Vedomosti*, 30 December 2011.

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Russia, which was the last to join the group and continues to swing between systemic and more radical action. Just Russia was potentially in a position to constitute itself as a genuine social-democratic opposition, but in the end succumbed to regime pressure.<sup>22</sup> Of the parliamentary parties it nevertheless retains the greatest potential to act in defence of the constitutional state, and is thus one of the most closely monitored by the regime.

Much of the anti-systemic animus in the protest movement was directed not only against the regime but also against the 'systemic' opposition and its long-term leaders. The 1990s generation of professional politicians, such as Vladimir Ryzhkov, Boris Nemtsov and Mikhail Kasyanov, kept the flame of opposition alive by organizing various movements and actions, but even before the onset of the new era of contentious politics they were being outflanked. From July 2009 Eduard Limonov, the founder of the National Bolshevik Party, organized civic protests in defence of the right of the freedom of assembly on the final day of months with 31 days, to defend Article 31 of the constitution guaranteeing citizens of the Russian Federation the right to assemble peacefully. The protests were joined by leading human rights organizations, including the Moscow Helsinki Group and Memorial.

A new generation of 'non-systemic' leaders came to the fore. Chief among them is Alexei Navalny, who rose to prominence through vivid speeches and a view of Russian politics that combined radical political liberalism with nationalist obscurantism. He used various web projects, notably RosPil from 2010 and RosYama from 2011, to expose the corrupt activities of state officials and bureaucrats.<sup>23</sup> He popularized the view of United Russia as 'the party of thieves and swindlers' and came to epitomize the angry 'urban middle class'. Like Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's LDPR, he favours Russia becoming a unitary state and considers federalism unnecessary and an impediment to national development. Navalny proposes an enhanced political role for cities, accompanied by the abolition of ethno-federal republics and autonomies to create a 'national state', instead of a federal or multinational one.<sup>24</sup> While he certainly had a point, given the arbitrariness of many regional borders and the emergence of 'ethnocratic' republics, in political terms any attempt to abolish Russia's ethno-federal system would almost certainly provoke the disintegration of the country. Not surprisingly, in 2007 Navalny was expelled from Yabloko because of his 'nationalist' leanings.

Between May and September 2009 Navalny served as an adviser to the liberal governor of Kirov (Vyatka) region, Nikita Belykh. He was later charged with embezzling R16 million (\$500,000) worth of wood from the state-owned timber company Kirovles when he worked briefly in the region, which in July 2013 led to what was widely interpreted as a politically inspired criminal conviction. His five-year sentence, however, was suspended, allowing his political career to continue. In the Moscow mayoral election in September 2013 he won an impressive 27 per cent of the popular vote. The various criminal prosecutions continued, ending in his confinement under house arrest. Navalny's list of regime figures most implicated in the takeover of Crimea in March 2014 served as the basis of those sanctioned by the United States, an astonishing achievement for someone with no formal political status. As a result, he was banned from using the internet.

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<sup>22</sup> These tensions are reflected in the views of their leader; see Nikolai Levichev, *Politika: modus vivendi. Stat'i, vystupleniya, interv'yū (2011–12)* [Politics: modus vivendi. Essays, speeches and interviews] (Moscow: Klyuch-C, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> For details, see Konstantin Voronkov, *Aleksei Navalnyi: Groza zhulikov i vorov* [Alexey Navalny: A nightmare for crooks and thieves] (Moscow: Eksmo, 2012).

<sup>24</sup> 'Aleksei Naval'nyi: Byt' luchshim oppozitsionnym politikom v Rossii – eto ochen' prosto'" [Alexey Navalny: Being the best opposition politician in Russia is very easy], *GQ*, June 2013.

[http://www.gq.ru/magazine/featured/40667\\_aleksey\\_navalny\\_byt\\_luchshim\\_oppozitsionnym\\_politikom\\_v\\_rossii\\_eto\\_ochen\\_prosto.ph](http://www.gq.ru/magazine/featured/40667_aleksey_navalny_byt_luchshim_oppozitsionnym_politikom_v_rossii_eto_ochen_prosto.ph).

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In an attempt to achieve some basic unity, a Coordination Council of the Opposition (CCO) was elected in an internet poll in October 2012. It consisted of 45 members, 30 of whom were elected from a 'general' list and another 15 from three separate streams: liberal, left-wing and nationalist. Some 81,000 people participated in the online vote – which, although impressive, was no more than a tiny sample of Russia's population. Navalny came top, and was joined by the writer Dmitry Bykov, the chess player Garry Kasparov, the TV presenter Ksenia Sobchak and Sergei Udaltsov. One surprising outcome was the relatively low proportion of the vote cast for left-wingers and nationalists. Later, members of Just Russia elected to the CCO were forced to choose between party membership and participation in 'anti-systemic' activities, and in the end the party leadership chose conformity over opposition. The enormous diversity of the group impeded coherent actions, most of its meetings lacked a quorum, and in October 2013 the CCO was dissolved.

The fundamental question is whether Russian society has the mobilizational potential that has been on display so often in Ukraine. As one study noted before the dénouement of the 'Ukrainian revolution' in February 2014, 'society is becoming the decisive player in Ukrainian politics', and it stressed that 'in contrast to Russia and Belarus there is a stable critical mass in Ukraine interested in and capable of influencing the political situation, sometimes even decisively'.<sup>25</sup> However, as in Ukraine, the protest potential was not substantially channelled through traditional instruments of interest representation. Russian trade unions, for example, have long been considered little more than an arm of the regime, although they have recently become a more significant political force.<sup>26</sup> The protest wave tended to forge new links among existing groups and movements rather than recruiting new layers into political activism.<sup>27</sup> In the language of the literature on social capital, this was more 'bonding' together an existing community than 'bridging' over to build alliances with new actors. Communities of protest were created through the new social media, but they were not able to become 'a coherent and independent political subject'.<sup>28</sup>

### Regime responses

The protest movement threatened the factional balance that Putin so assiduously maintained. All the factions were torn by internal tensions, but the broad division between the *siloviki*, the regime hard-liners, often with a security-service background, and the *civiliki*, the soft-liners in favour of adaptive and evolutionary reform to strengthen the rule of law, the competitive market economy and political institutions, remains primary. For the former, a strong and independent Russia in global affairs is the priority, and at home a centralized and decisional political system with a strong dose of state management in the economy. They also favour the minimum of public accountability to allow their various dark schemes to prosper. On the other side, the *civiliki* gathered around Medvedev's modernization agenda designed to create a more liberal economy, integrated with the West, and with functioning democratic institutions and the rule of law.

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25 Grzegorz Gromadzki and Łukasz Wenerski, *Society – The Decisive Player in Ukrainian Politics?* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, February 2014), <http://www.isp.org.pl/uploads/pdf/86728390.pdf>, p. 2.

26 Grigory Tumanov, 'Now I'm a Union Man', *OpenDemocracy Russia*, 13 January 2014, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/grigory-tumanov/now-im-union-man>; Irina Olimpieva and Robert W. Ortung, 'Russian Unions as Political Actors', *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 60, No. 5, September–October 2013.

27 Samuel A. Greene, 'Beyond Bolotnaia: Bridging Old and New in Russia's Election Protest Movement', *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 60, No. 2, March–April 2013.

28 Nicole Bode and Andrey Makarychev, 'The New Social Media in Russia: Political Blogging by the Government and the Opposition', *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 60, No. 2, March–April 2013, p. 54.

The popular movement, despite its divisions, broadly supported the latter programme, hence the immediate *de facto* alliance between the *civiliki* and the soft-liner civil protesters. Equally, Putin did everything in his power to ensure that the electoral insurgency model of political change, operationalized as ‘colour revolutions’ elsewhere, would have minimal traction in Russia.<sup>29</sup> With the prospect of an alliance of regime and opposition soft-liners, Putin’s balancing role was in danger of becoming redundant, something that he could not accept. The leading *civiliki* were dispersed, with Surkov exiled from the Kremlin and Kudrin out of office, while the *siloviki* regrouped. The sophisticated Sergei Naryshkin, head of the Presidential Administration, was sent to manage the Duma, Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin went into business (as chairman of Rosneft), and Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov was brought in to manage the Presidential Administration. The Putin system had always pursued a distinctive approach to managing opposition, eschewing many of the traditional practices of authoritarian regimes and instead devising extensive co-optation mechanisms, sophisticated modes of control and manipulation, accompanied by techniques of ‘selective intolerance’ that did not overtly repudiate democratic and legal norms.

The split between the two main factions within the regime gave rise to what is fundamentally a two-pronged response. This had already been the case, although in a different way, following the coloured revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, with repression that saw intensified controls over NGOs and a crackdown on the opposition, accompanied by the mobilization of supporters in ‘patriotic’ youth organizations.<sup>30</sup> The two-track approach now balanced repression with concessions. On the one side, a range of repressive legislation was adopted, including tougher penalties on unsanctioned demonstrations and a ‘foreign agents’ law that targeted NGOs in receipt of funding from abroad. Much of the repression was overseen by the Russian Investigative Committee (RIC) headed by Alexander Bastrykin. This culminated in the criminal prosecution of Navalny for alleged offences committed while working in Kirov. Above all, the ‘Bolotnaya case’ against the 6 May 2012 protesters was accompanied by their defamation in the media and some heavy-handed actions and punitive sentences. Eleven were amnestied in December 2013 to mark the 20th anniversary of the constitution, and the final group of eight were sentenced to between one and four years on 24 February 2014, with one given a suspended sentence.

The Russian members of the international review of Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s second trial, commissioned by Medvedev’s Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights, came under attack shortly after Putin’s return to the Kremlin. The report was scathing about the verdict, which was held to have misunderstood and misapplied basic concepts of Russian civil and criminal law.<sup>31</sup> In September 2012 officials from the RIC searched the home of Mikhail Subbotin, a co-author of an independent expert report on the Yukos case, and two of his colleagues, apparently investigating the old charge that Yukos money had been laundered in the West and then channelled back to Russian NGOs in exchange for their reaching ‘deliberately false conclusions’ about Khodorkovsky’s conviction ‘under the guise of independent public expertise’.<sup>32</sup> Sergei Guriev, the head of the New Economic School, was repeatedly called in for questioning until in May 2013 he fled to join his wife

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29 Described in detail by Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

30 Robert Horvath, *Putin’s Preventative Counter-Revolution: Post-Soviet Authoritarianism and the Spectre of Velvet Revolution* (London & New York: Routledge, 2013).

31 Report of the Presidential Council of the RF for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights on the Results of the Public Scholarly Analysis of the Court Materials of the Criminal Case against M. B. Khodorkovsky and P. L. Lebedev (tried by the Khamovnichesky District Court of the City of Moscow; the verdict issued on 27.12.2010) (Moscow, 2011).

32 Tom Balmforth, ‘Critics of Khodorkovsky Verdict in Crosshairs’, RFE/RL Russia Report, 27 March 2013.

and children in Paris, saying that 'There is no guarantee that I won't lose my freedom'.<sup>33</sup> The 'experts' case' was part of a larger attempt to intimidate the creative intelligentsia, but it resulted in a growing flow of talent abroad.

On the other side, typical of the essential duality of the Putin system, coercive measures were balanced by political reform. Paradoxically, just at the time when Medvedev was about to lose his grip on power, he was emboldened by the protest movement to launch the reforms that he had been too pusillanimous to introduce when formally in charge. In his state-of-the-nation speech on 22 December 2011, Medvedev insisted that 'we treat any criticism of state institutions and individual officials with the utmost attention and respect', but he stressed that 'attempts to manipulate Russian citizens, to mislead them and incite social discord are unacceptable [...] Russia needs democracy, not chaos'. He proposed, in the light of 'the new stage of the nation's development' and in support of initiatives advanced by Putin, 'a comprehensive reform of our political system'. The measures included the return to direct elections for regional governors, a simplified procedure to register political parties, a change in the electoral system to 'strengthen the links between the deputies and the electorate', other ideas to simplify candidate nomination in elections, and several other proposals, including decentralization.<sup>34</sup> Some of Medvedev's plans for political reform had allegedly been prepared long before the protest marches but had been blocked.<sup>35</sup>

The bulk of Medvedev's proposals were adopted, although not always in the form he had envisaged. The easier registration of parties, with now only 500 members needed as opposed to the 45,000 required earlier, led to an explosion of party formation, with over 70 registered by early 2014. This was certainly intended in part to fragment the opposition, with numerous 'spoiler' groupings created with names similar to more established parties. In other words, there was a partial reversion to the tactics of the era before Putin's consolidation of the party system. On 24 February 2014 Putin signed into law a new electoral system whereby single-mandate districts were restored for half the 450-strong Duma, with the other half elected by proportional representation. The five-per-cent representation threshold was also restored, and there were simplified procedures for parties to get on the ballot paper and for individuals to stand, although the ban on electoral blocs remained. The political reforms were not just a response to the popular protests but also part of an adaptation of a political system that had demonstrably been unable to deliver the goals set by the regime. Surkov's old exclusionary model had outlived its usefulness, while the new approach signalled more flexible forms of political management.<sup>36</sup>

Vyacheslav Volodin replaced Surkov in December 2011 at the head of the Kremlin's domestic policy administration, and was at the heart of managing what can be called a 'regime reset' or, in more traditional terms, elements of political liberalization. He implemented a policy of 'managed competition' that potentially created space for more pluralist electoral politics. The reset allowed 54 of the newly registered parties to participate in the September 2013 regional elections, and as a result 31 parties gained representation in regional and municipal legislatures. Opposition figures won mayoral elections in Ekaterinburg and Petrozavodsk. At the Valdai Club that same month

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<sup>33</sup> Michael Bohm, 'Guriey's exile is a huge loss for Russia', *Moscow Times*, 14 June 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Dmitrii Medvedev, 'Poslanie Prezidenta Federal'nomu Sobraniyu', [Presidential address to the Federal Assembly] 22 December 2011, <http://news.kremlin.ru/news/14088/print>.

<sup>35</sup> Stated by Kudrin in an interview with Vladimir Pozner, Channel 1, 23 January 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Grigorii V. Golosov, 'The 2012 Political Reform in Russia: The Interplay of Liberalizing Concessions and Authoritarian Corrections', *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 59, No. 6, November–December 2012.

Volodin insisted that ‘The move towards fair elections will intensify, and there will be greater political competition in the future.’<sup>37</sup> This strategy was not just for public display, and Kremlin insiders confirmed that this was the line pursued in the corridors of power, and even Putin at the same Valdai Club meeting went out of his way to endorse the strategy of electoral decompression. Permitting Navalny to run in the Moscow mayoral election in September 2013 and the opposition victories elsewhere demonstrated that the regime was willing to experiment with electoral competition.

The regime shifted to a new mode of operation, based on disciplining its own elites, developing the ‘popular front’ to field candidates in the restored single-mandate seats to compensate for the declining efficacy of United Russia, incorporating the part of the opposition ready to engage in electoral politics, the absorption into the regime’s rhetoric of nationalist concerns, and increases in social payments to wean the socially motivated part of the protest movement from the opposition. This two-track response was accompanied by a range of pressures to keep the elite in line, including a push against officials holding financial assets abroad and enhanced scrutiny on foreign-owned assets, measures that were enhanced by Western sanctions against regime leaders and their associates following the annexation of Crimea. Equally, the regime’s obsession with alleged foreign intervention provoked the ‘foreign agents act’ against NGOs. The amnesty to mark the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the constitution in December 2013 saw some of the Bolotnaya defendants released and, on 20 December, Khodorkovsky, after 10 years in jail, was freed. The regime could now claim to favour the development of ‘a new strong opposition’ in contrast to the ‘capricious narcissists’ who had hitherto led the opposition.<sup>38</sup>

### Perspectives for opposition and change

The political reforms of 2012 blurred if not eradicated the line between the systemic and ‘non-systemic’ opposition in Russia, the latter term denoting groups that were forced to act outside the sanctioned frame of political action. The CPRF and Just Russia tried to join the demonstrations in December 2011, when the situation looked uncertain, and despite plans later for the CPRF’s head, Gennady Zyuganov, to attend the September 2012 ‘march of millions’, in the end the party retreated and criticized the ‘orangism’ of the protesters. Just Russia’s retreat was far more painful. Three of its leading activists, Gennady and Dmitry Gudkov (father and son) and Ilya Ponomarev, enthusiastically joined the protest actions of the non-systemic opposition, threatening a split in the party. The business interests that funded the party insisted that it retain a constructive relationship with the Kremlin. Gennady Gudkov was one of the most popular rostrum speakers and emerged as a threat to chairman Sergei Mironov within the party. In the end, in July 2012 the former was unceremoniously stripped of his Duma seat, and in October Mironov threatened members of the party who cooperated with the opposition with expulsion from the party: ‘In such circumstances, playing revolution and provoking the authorities to further tighten the screws is either infantilism,

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<sup>37</sup> Author’s notes from the meeting.

<sup>38</sup> “‘Eto kapriznye nartsissy, a ne oppozitsiya”: Interv’yu s teledushchim Dmitriem Kiselevym’ [It’s not opposition, it’s a bunch of capricious narcissists: Interview with news anchor Dmitry Kiselev], Lenta.ru, 25 September 2013, <http://lenta.ru/articles/2013/09/25/kiselev>.

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or even worse, a dangerous and wilful provocation aimed at attaining one's own egoistic goals at all costs.'<sup>39</sup>

Just Russia voted for the Dima Yakovlev law, which banned Americans from adopting Russian children, and when its activists joined the impressively large 'march against scoundrels' on 13 January 2013 protesting against the law, the Just Russia leadership stipulated that its members could not participate in rallies organized by other political organizations. On 13 March 2013 the Gudkovs, having refused to comply with the ultimatum either to stop their activities in the Coordination Council or to leave the party, were expelled from Just Russia's ranks. Ponomarev and Oleg Shein, the Just Russia activist who went on a 40-day hunger strike in protest against irregularities in the Astrakhan mayoral elections of 4 March 2012, were issued with the same ultimatum and complied: the former left the Left Front and the latter resigned from the Coordination Council. In December 2013 Gennady Gudkov went on to establish the Social Democrats of Russia party, thus entering a rather crowded niche previously dominated by Just Russia. Dmitry Gudkov and Ponomarev joined the party's political council. The Social Democrats of Russia planned to unite with the Green Alliance–People's Party headed by Gleb Fetisov (a billionaire businessman) and Oleg Mitvol, the former deputy head of Russia's environmental agency. Ponomarev planned to run in the 6 April 2014 Novosibirsk mayoral elections, but his negligible poll ratings prompted him to pull out to avoid embarrassment. In the event the election was won by a Communist, Anatoly Lokot, who took 44 per cent of the vote against the United Russia candidate's 40 per cent, demonstrating how the easing of electoral management allowed the traditional parties to reassert themselves as a dynamic part of the opposition.

The bacchanalia of party formation is easy to dismiss as a tactic by the regime to fragment the opposition, yet it did stimulate a great deal of grassroots activity. There were clear incentives to participate in elections, especially at the municipal level, where opposition leaders have been elected to local government bodies. The hard-line oppositionist Nemtsov won a seat to the Yaroslavl regional parliament in September 2013. The regime's political reforms successfully changed the political opportunity structure to encourage the opposition to form parties and to 'electoralize' their activity. The irreconcilables, such as the former world chess champion Garry Kasparov, went into exile, while the others were marginalized.

New opportunities for engagement have opened up, although the tutelary instruments of the regime have by no means been dismantled – they have only been modified to match the new circumstances. The controlled liberalization track of regime policy was granted from above and by the same token could be withdrawn; yet the mobilization of mass and party opposition demonstrated that this could be politically risky. A certain space for competitive politics has been prised open by the opposition in alliance with the mass protest movement. The regime insists that in the first instance this will operate only at the local, and not even the regional, level, but even this may be jeopardized by the anti-Orange reaction following the Ukrainian events this year.

Even without regime interference the opposition has been prone to splits. After a long and painful path the alliance of Ryzhkov's Republican Party (established in 1990) and the Party of People's Freedom (Parnas) headed by Nemtsov and Kasyanov was registered as RPR-Parnas in 2012, only to

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<sup>39</sup> Cited in Tatyana Stanovaya, 'Opposition(s) in Waiting', *New Eastern Europe*, 6 February 2013, <http://www.neweasterneurope.eu/articles-and-commentary/574-opposition-s-in-waiting>.

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split once again in February of this year. Ryzhkov left the party amid condemnation of his 'soft-liner' stance towards the regime. He had been part of a delegation of major non-parliamentary parties that met Putin in November 2013, the first such meeting in 13 years. Other members of the delegation included Sergei Mitrokhin, the head of Yabloko, and Mikhail Prokhorov of Civil Platform. Ryzhkov urged Putin to include 'political prisoners' on the list of those to be amnestied as part of the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the constitution.<sup>40</sup> The lobbying may have helped convince Putin to release Khodorkovsky and some other victims of politically motivated prosecutions. On 8 February Ryzhkov resigned from RPR-Parnas, citing 'ideological differences', which included his criticism of the plans of his co-leaders, Nemtsov and Kasyanov, to cooperate with nationalists and radical leftists and their criticism of his contacts with the authorities. Ryzhkov had opposed RPR-Parnas's endorsement of Navalny's Moscow mayoral bid, and now Kasyanov favoured a link with Navalny's Party of Progress.<sup>41</sup> Ryzhkov, or at least some of his supporters, toyed with the idea of resurrecting the Republican Party.<sup>42</sup>

At the same time, an 'elite opposition' emerged that carries the torch of the regime soft-liners, promoting adaptive change to strengthen the constitutional state. Its members were not 'defectors' in the classical sense (something for which they were much criticized by hard-line opponents of the regime), but reflected deep misgivings within the regime. Kudrin was pre-eminent among them, seeking to act as a conduit between the regime and the people. Even before the September 2011 events it was clear that Kudrin was becoming an independent politician, and he now shed his grey technocratic profile. For 10 years he had managed the nation's finances with an iron hand, refusing to allow the mass disbursement of the windfall energy rents. Counter-cyclical accumulation in various sovereign wealth funds provided the country with the resources to weather the economic crisis from mid-2008, providing liquidity for troubled banks and enterprises without driving the country into debt. As a result, in 2010 Kudrin was named 'banker of the year' by *Forbes*. He also aroused the hostility of those of a populist disposition who wanted to see Russia's energy wealth invested in infrastructure and society. Kudrin was one of the core members of the Putin team, and even after his dismissal Putin went out of his way to stress his continuing friendship with the fallen minister. However, Kudrin was not a street politician, and his speech at the Sakharov Prospect demonstration on 24 December was received with a mix of boos and cheers. He sought to position himself as a mediator between the government and the protesters, and had credibility with both, although in the end no formal 'roundtable' dialogue was held. Kudrin did not defect from the regime, but his stance exposed clear divisions within the elite.

In April 2012 Kudrin established the Civic Initiatives Committee to channel ideas on resolving political and economic problems into the system, while drawing on the newly mobilized professional classes. He explicitly refused to create a party, and instead used the committee in a variety of ways, including specialist expertise and election monitoring once the independent NGO in this field, Golos, fell foul of the 'foreign agents' legislation. Although Kudrin was a strong advocate of economic 'reform', it was not clear what specific measures he advocated, other than to raise the pension age (currently 55 for women and 60 for men), impose strict controls on government expenditure, increasing investment in infrastructure, and 'stop distributing social benefits with a watering can'. On politics, though, he was unequivocal: 'Russia needs free elections'; not simply a

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40 Natalya Krainova, 'Putin meets for the first time with nonparliamentary Opposition', *Moscow Times*, 21 November 2013.

41 Natalya Krainova, 'Ryzhkov quits RPR-Parnas Opposition Party', *Moscow Times*, 10 February 2014.

42 'RPR-Parnas Party Co-Chairman Downplays Split', Itar-Tass, 5 March 2014, <http://en.itar-tass.com/russia/722240>.



re-run of the parliamentary elections, advocated by the opposition, but a thorough review of the normative framework to ensure the fairness of future ballots.<sup>43</sup>

This exemplifies how the opposition has been able to link up with regime soft-liners. Kudrin's close relationship with the president was no secret and was trumpeted by Putin on numerous occasions.<sup>44</sup> Prokhorov also rode the protest wave and later created the Civil Platform party, but was limited by the systemic constraints on genuine political pluralism. He refused to put himself forward for the 2013 Moscow mayoral election in, citing the issue of his foreign assets while insisting that his party would prepare for the 14 September 2014 Moscow Duma elections. Prokhorov remained both an insider and an outsider, but represented the new generation of oligarchs who were tentatively finding their way back into politics after the effective ban on business activism since the Yukos affair. The restoration of the 'oligarch democracy' of the 1990s and still practised in Ukraine is not on the cards, but there are signs of intra-elite fragmentation, which usually signifies the moment when a democratic breakthrough becomes possible.

The regime's double-track response to the 'Bolotnaya' movement expanded the opportunities for oppositional activity while providing space for intra-system reformers. However, the Ukrainian crisis has intensified regime insecurities and provoked the Kremlin to 'tighten the screws' to avert a home-grown colour revolution.<sup>45</sup> On 7 April, meeting with his security chiefs, Putin was explicit:

We will not accept a situation like what happened in Ukraine, when in many cases it was through non-governmental organizations that the nationalist and neo-Nazi groups and militants, who became the shock troops in the anti-constitutional coup d'état, received funding from abroad.<sup>46</sup>

The Kremlin considered Yanukovich's overthrow an illegal seizure of power by an insurgent group backed by the West. The Ukrainian revolution was the first event of this kind in the post-communist area that was not provoked by the theft of an election. Indeed, it was one of the first not to be labelled a 'colour revolution' – it was, quite simply, a revolution, signalling that revolution had returned as mode of political change in the post-Soviet states. As such, it represented an enormous challenge to the Russian system. In comparative terms, the Ukrainian events may well play a similar role to the Polish uprising of 1863, which derailed Alexander II's moves towards greater constitutionalism and set back intra-systemic reform by a generation.

The Putinite hard-liners have intensified vigilance to interdict what they see as Western-supported 'democracy promotion' measures designed to achieve regime change. On the other side, the events in Ukraine, like those of a decade earlier, have encouraged part of the opposition to employ 'velvet' methods to harness opposition to Putin's rule.<sup>47</sup> Nemtsov has warned that 'a Russian Mайдan is inevitable'.<sup>48</sup> On 15 March some 30,000 people attended the 'Peace March' (*Marsh mira*) through the centre of Moscow in protest against the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis by the deployment of Russian forces in Crimea. However, to turn the famous assertion of Ukraine's former president,

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43 Former Russian Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin: "We have to take chance with more democracy, *Der Spiegel*, 23 January 2013, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-putin-ally-alexei-kudrin-on-democracy-in-russia-a-878873.html>.

44 For example, in his 15 December 2011 press conference Putin stressed 'As you know, Alexei Kudrin never left my team. He is my long-time compañoero, and I would even say that he is my friend,' 'Stenogramma programmy "Razgovor s Vladimirom Putinyom. Prodolzhenie"' [Programme transcript: Interview with Vladimir Putin. Continued], <http://www.rg.ru/2011/12/15/stenogramma.html>, 15 December 2011.

45 Anna Arutunyan, 'Kremlin to tighten screws in wake of Kiev unrest', *Moscow News*, 24 February 2014.

46 Shaun Walker, 'Fears of escalation as Donetsk "secedes" from Ukraine', *The Guardian*, 8 April 2014.

47 For the earlier period, see Horvath, 'The Spectre of a "Moscow Mайдan" in Putin's Preventative Counter-Revolution', pp. 47–84.

48 Boris Nemtsov, 'Uroki Maidana' [The Lessons of Mайдan], *Echo Moskvy*, 24 February 2014, [http://www.echo.msk.ru/blog/nemtsov\\_boris/1264336-echo/](http://www.echo.msk.ru/blog/nemtsov_boris/1264336-echo/).

Leonid Kuchma, on its head, 'Russia is not Ukraine'. Hence comparisons are misplaced. Putin's Russia undoubtedly has governance problems, but it is not a brutal kleptocracy run by a group concerned solely with its own enrichment. Although contentious, the Putinite administrative system operates within rational codes of perceived state interests. Following the Yukos affair, moreover, the elite structure changed radically. Whereas in Ukraine the 'oligarchs' retain the sort of power that they had claimed to exercise in Russia under Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s, Putin had rendered them all dependent on the state. Equally, Russia is not a consolidated authoritarian regime like that of Egypt, where there had been some 30 years of repression in the framework of a state of emergency by the time of the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in 2011. State dualism allows the four corners of the political matrix to interact in sometimes surprising ways.

## Conclusion

The white ribbon became the symbol of Russia's protest movement, focusing on the struggle for genuinely democratic elections and the empowerment of the institutions of the constitutional state. The popular movement sought to strengthen the constitutional state and reduce the administrative interference of the regime, but with a fundamental division of views about the capacity of the Russian constitutional order for reform and renewal. The great dilemma for the opposition remains – to calibrate its response to regime practices. Talk of a 'Russian spring', let alone a 'snow revolution', is misjudged. By 2014 the popular opposition movement was not so much on the wane; it had transformed its mode of action, while 'the situation' itself had changed. The foreign policy crisis in Ukraine only consolidated Putin's support, which rose from the long-term plateau of 62 per cent to over 80 per cent according to different polls. The more cynical among his critics would argue that was the intention of the president's Crimean gambit, accompanied by attempts to divert attention from declining economic performance, with the country registering only 1.3 per cent growth in 2013. Equally, Putin's system of rule took on an increasingly personalistic and closed character, opening up a whole new sphere of political risk, while the proportion of *siloviki* occupying top posts in the regime, which had dipped under Medvedev, rose once again. Nevertheless, the dual-track policy continues, allowing space for party development and rather more competitive elections at the local level.

The turbulence associated with the 2011–12 election revealed the contradictions of the Russian dual state and raised the fundamental question about its durability. Hesitant to embrace full-blooded authoritarianism, the regime was forced to make concessions through the liberalization of the political system. Much remains to be done, above all the strengthening of the impartial institutions of the constitutional state, including free, fair and transparent elections, and the independence of the courts. Nevertheless, the 'Medvedevian' line in Russian politics remains alive – the soft-liner strategy of gradual ameliorative change. In this context, hard-line opposition and Western sanctions will only encourage the hard-liners within the regime, and, as Khodorkovsky argues, let the genie of Russian nationalist revanchism out of the bottle.<sup>49</sup> By contrast, an alliance of regime soft-liners and the 'constructive' opposition offers Russia a unique opportunity for evolutionary change. This does not mean compromising principles, or even the avoidance of mass action, but it

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<sup>49</sup> 'Ukraine Crisis: Khodorkovsky Warns on Russian Sanctions', BBC, Radio 4 Today programme, 22 May 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27513321>.

does entail an 'ethics of responsibility' among the opposition that can be reciprocated by the intra-regime reformers.

Ultimately, Russia's dual state is a transitional phenomenon, however much Putin himself rejects the transition paradigm and dismisses the notion that the system over which he presides is impermanent. The dual-state equilibrium is provisional and maintains the 'situation', but by the same token it is full of creative potential. The new political opportunities opened up after the 2011–12 protests remain, and thus Russian political development has entered a new era in which opposition remains a potent force, even when it is latent. A more dynamic, although fragmented, party system has re-emerged; the election law has been changed to allow easier participation for parties and independents; and the regime retains a two-track approach to managing political affairs. Many leading oppositionists have declared their readiness to participate in the September 2014 regional executive and legislative elections, as well as in a range of mayoral and local elections. This is not yet full-scale liberalization, but the wiser heads within the regime understand, with the Arab Spring and Ukrainian events in mind, that repression alone only drags out the agony. The initiative can pass to the opposition with frightening rapidity. Ultimately, the fundamental question is whether the dual-state 'situation' can be transcended in an evolutionary manner through an alliance of regime and oppositional soft-liners, or whether the hard-liners in both camps will fight it out.

### About the Author

Richard Sakwa is Professor of Russian and European Politics and Head of the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Kent. He is also an Associate Fellow of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House, and a member of the Academy of Social Sciences.

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The Royal Institute of International Affairs  
Chatham House  
10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE  
T +44 (0)20 7957 5700 F +44 (0)20 7957 5710  
[contact@chathamhouse.org](mailto:contact@chathamhouse.org) [www.chathamhouse.org](http://www.chathamhouse.org)  
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