

## The Failure of Managed Modernization

The lack of legitimacy of Putin's system will lead to growing conflicts between Russia and the West

by Stefan Meister

*Following the elections, the Russian government will seek to counteract its dwindling approval ratings at home by a more confrontational course in its foreign policy. It will come into conflict with the EU over their common neighborhood and with the United States over European missile defense. Germany and the EU should finally see Russia's leadership for what it is: undemocratic and resistant to modernization. Instead, Europe should concentrate on cooperation with the Russian civil society.*

### A Nervous Russian Leadership

The hard course taken by Russian security services against the recent protests in Moscow – the largest protests in years – reveals the nervousness of the Russian government. At the beginning of December 2011, the ruling United Russia party lost its two-thirds majority in the Russian parliamentary elections. Despite the leadership's efforts to influence the elections to their own advantage, their desired result was not achieved. Election observers from every political party and from civil society organizations, as well as the population's increased awareness of voter fraud, prevented even larger manipulation. But the lack of electoral alternatives and continued economic and political stagnation have caused growing frustration among Russians.

### The Development of a Critical Mass

A pivotal result of Dmitri Medvedev's presidency has been the development of a counter-public to the political establishment and its managed public. Medvedev promoted the opening of public discourse and eased

pressure on the media. This policy was an integral part of Medvedev's modernization campaign and was meant to compensate for the alienation between elites and the general population. But this concession has gained momentum, and the Russian leadership is no longer able to control it. Uncontrolled discussions of socially relevant topics are increasingly taking place in critical media and the Internet. Via internet people inform the public about corruption, the shortcomings of regional administrations, or the failures of authorities in crisis situations, in addition to openly criticizing the system. Russia's leadership has reacted to this with counter-propaganda and by continuing to cultivate the images of Vladimir Putin and Dmitrij Medvedev. However, this has only deepened the divide between the government and the population.

### The Switch

The culmination of cynicism and ignorance toward the people came with the announcement that Dmitrij Medvedev and Vladimir Putin would switch positions for next year's presidential elections, as well as the comment that they had already decided this before

Medvedev's election in 2008. This reduced Medvedev's modernization rhetoric and the apparent conflict between the state's two leaders in the run-up to the parliamentary elections to absurdity. Everyone who believed in Russia's modernization under President Medvedev was proven wrong and the people's need for change was ignored.

This switch reinforced the lack of legitimacy of the "Putin system" and led to further estrangement between the prime minister and the population. Putin is not any longer seen as a leadership figure who stands above all state institutions. The failure of United Russia and of Medvedev is also seen as a failure of Putin himself. The system's lack of legitimacy means that Putin is actually a victim of the inefficient axis of power that he created. His planned re-election next year will only confirm his lack of authority since the desired number of votes will only be attained through more manipulation.

### Compensation through Foreign Policy

Russia's leadership will seek to counteract the people's lack of trust by taking a hard line with the West. Over the last 15 years, Russian foreign policy has served to compensate for the country's democratic deficits and the population's lacking political participation. With the October 2011 announcement of the establishment of a Eurasian Union by 2015, Vladimir Putin opened a central area of conflict with the European Union. The priority during his third presidency will be in strengthening political and economic integration in the post-Soviet space. This is a direct challenge to the EU's Eastern Partnership and the planned free-trade agreement between the EU and Ukraine. Even if Putin denies trying to restore the Soviet Union, he still believes in using the EU's current weaknesses to bring his

neighbors closer to Russia. This should help persuade the Russian people of the state's strength and attractiveness and divert them from domestic shortcomings.

A second area of conflict is the planned US missile shield in Europe that will be built without the cooperation of Russia. During a visit to a newly constructed radar station in Kaliningrad in November 2011, President Medvedev said: "The opening of this station is an answer to the assembly of a missile shield in Europe, and it will lead to other countermeasures" from Russia. Medvedev's visit to a military installation on the EU's external border was an attempt to improve his weak image through tough words. It was also a clear sign that the enclave of Kaliningrad is not seen by Russia's leadership as a test case for cooperation with the EU, but rather as a means to threaten others during times of domestic crisis. This military rhetoric should be understood for what it is: It is not actually meant to be aggressive, but is rather an attempt to win back the support of the Russian people through menacing words. There is no foreign policy strategy behind it.

### What to Do?

Despite the fact that the European Union now finds itself in a financial and credibility crisis, that does not mean that Russia has become more attractive in the post-Soviet space. On the contrary: The failure of a "managed" modernization under President Medvedev is a barrier to Russia's future foreign policy relevance. If the leadership in Moscow shows no interest in fighting corruption, implementing constitutional principles, confronting the demographic crisis, or modernizing its infrastructure, educational, and research systems, then it will lack the resources it needs to be a relevant actor in international politics. At the same time, the increasingly confrontational foreign policy course being fol-

lowed by the Russian government as a result of its lack of legitimacy at home will impede Russia's inclusion in international crisis management, such as in the case of Iran or Syria.

Although the debt crisis affects the EU, Russia is in the same boat. EU member states are far and away the most important foreign consumer of Russian resources as well as Russia's most important investors and trade partners. At the same time, 45 percent of Russian reserve funds are invested in Euro assets (45 percent in dollars and 10 percent in the British pound). Even with the 2008/2009 global financial crisis, Russia's leadership realized how dependent it is

on the European and global economies with regard to exports and loans. The EU therefore has to ask itself to what extent the diminishing legitimacy of the Russian leadership and the lack of modernization in the country could lead to the destabilization of Russia and its neighbors. It is even more important to finally acknowledge the reality of the Russian elite and Putin's system: Despite all rhetoric to the contrary, this system is authoritarian, anti-democratic, and resistant to modernization. Therefore, the Russian elite should not be the central contact for German and European policies in the future. Instead, the Russian people and civil society should at least be on the same level.

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