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Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief) ● Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)
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Kremlin's Three Preemptive Strikes against Non-Systemic Opposition

Stanislav Secrieru

The survival of Russia's political regime after the controversial parliamentary elections in 2011 is partially the result of the Kremlin's efficient strategy to contain and preempt the emancipation of non-systemic opposition. After several defeats in 2012–2013 in large cities, the authorities revamped efforts in 2014 to weaken the status of mayors in order to block the rise of opposition in urban areas. In the context of the 2015 economic crisis, the Kremlin has assembled a movement to intimidate and quash public protests orchestrated by opposition. In attempting to cement the regime until 2024, its leadership has cultivated bellicose patriotism aimed at reducing the recruitment pool for opposition. The prospects for Russian opposition are bleak unless it consolidates and retakes the initiative.

Disempowering Urban Centres. After the disputed parliamentary elections of 2011, the challenge for the Kremlin came not only from the streets of Moscow but also from other urban centres across Russia with a sizable, and increasingly demanding middle class. Unlike governors, the mayors in 2012 were still elected by citizens. Sensing a temporary weakness in the Kremlin and disarray in *United Russia* (nominally the governing party) after the elections, the non-systemic opposition (the one that is not controlled by the Kremlin, hereinafter "opposition") tried to win ground in urban areas. Converting the protest mood to the national level, it prevailed in the spring of 2012 and autumn of 2013 as a result of fierce competition in a dozen cities and towns. The most dramatic wins were recorded in Yaroslavl and in Yekaterinburg. A rising star of the Russian opposition, Alexey Navalny, skilfully used his campaign for Moscow city mayor in 2013 to augment his public profile, becoming widely known beyond a social media audience. Thus, slowly cities and towns were turning into springboards for opposition to challenge the Kremlin at the local level.

In 2013, President Vladimir Putin expressed concerns with governance on the municipal level and the central authorities reacted promptly. To deal with independent mayors who refused to be co-opted after the elections, the Kremlin used selective law-enforcement bodies. For instance, the mayor of Yaroslavl was detained on corruption charges and demoted in July 2013. However, a more systemic solution to Putin's perceived problem with municipal governance came from the Russian parliament. In 2003, Russia introduced the position of a city-manager, which diluted the importance of an elected mayor. In 2014, the Duma went further to undermine the status of mayors by revising legislation on local self-governance. According to the changes, local authorities should legislate whether mayors will be elected directly or selected by local parliaments (controlled in most cases by *United Russia*) in cooperation with the governors. As of the end of 2014, in 61 regional capitals the mayors are now appointed, while in 19 regions mayors are still elected directly. Three more regions are expected in 2015 to cancel mayoral elections, which will make it increasingly difficult for the rest to resist for long this trend.

Building Anti-Maidan "Troops". Back in 2011 during the protests in Moscow, workers from heavy vehicle and tank manufacturer Uralvagonzavod in Nizhny Tagil, most probably encouraged by the Kremlin, offered to help authorities deal with the discontent in case police failed to restore "order." This mostly PR pledge was never carried out. After reaching their peak ahead of the 2012 presidential elections, the intensity of the protests cooled. The Kremlin's interest in enrolling, even rhetorically, industrial workers to provide a sort of active defence against opposition waned as well. However, the West's recent economic sanctions and precipitous decline in oil prices superposed Russia's structural problems on the public and pushed citizens' personal incomes into negative territory. In

turn, this raised the prospect of a revival of street politics. In his January appeal to the public to attend a "Spring Anti-Crisis March" (cancelled in the aftermath of the Boris Nemtsov assassination), Navalny argued that peaceful street protest is the only meaningful channel for citizens to communicate with power. As an answer to the Kremlin's accusation of empty talks and slogans, the protest organizers came up with not only a political message but clear social and economic demands. The authorities' answer was a combination of populism and an outsourcing of violence. The Kremlin promised pensions would be indexed to the real inflation rate. Some regions resumed the practice of the distribution of free bread to pensioners (e.g., in Tomsk) or a plan to introduce food stamps for low-income families (e.g., in Ulyanovsk).

But the main element in the Kremlin's strategy has been to build up a fear of a Maidan-style contagion to Russia to use against opposition. In an opinion poll conducted in 2015 by VTsIOM, 94% of Russians do not want to see a Maidan type of protests in Russia. In exacerbating the threat of violent revolution in Russia, Kremlin hastily assembled an anti-Maidan movement numbering, as of January 2015 according to its leaders, some thousand members. The constellation of organizations (such as the "Night Wolves" bikers group) and personalities (including Dmitri Sablin, a member of the Federal Assembly) united under the anti-Maidan roof does not conceal the aim to suppress, violently if necessary, any opposition attempts to organise public manifestations. In early 2015, the anti-Maidan group was involved in the disruption of an authorised anti-war picket against Russia's invasion in Ukraine, a spontaneous protest near Red Square against the sentencing of the Navalny brothers on criminal charges, and a planned lecture in Moscow on the anti-corruption fight in Russia. As the anti-Maidan group plans to increase membership and provide special training to its activists, the movement's activity to harass the opposition is likely to spread across Russia and might become more violent in the coming months.

Cultivating Bellicose Patriotism. The Kremlin is waging information warfare inside its own country in order to maintain the population's loyalty and complacency, both are necessary to keep the political regime in place at least until 2024 (through the 2016 parliamentary and 2018 presidential elections). It also seeks to reduce the pool of opposition sympathizers, pre-empting any challenge in mid- to long term. As the economic situation is projected to worsen in Russia, dragging living standards down, the struggle for the "hearts and minds" of the citizens is likely to intensify. The Kremlin's strategy to compensate for a shrinking economic pie is likely to rely on augmenting Putin's "cult of personality" and increasing patriotic education in society.

For the most enthusiastic crowd, Russia's mass media portray Putin as the true defender of national interests and Russia's "traditional values." In this logic, sanctions are the necessary price pay for Russia to remain independent and immune to outside influence. This segment of the population happily buys t-shirts with Putin's photo and the inscription "the most polite president," an allusion to the mythological "polite people" who seized Crimea from Ukraine. According to Levada opinion polls in 2015, 28% (compared to only 8% in 2001) consider the distribution of objects with the president's image solidifies his authority, while 17% (a decline from 42% in 2001) think that these put the president in an unfavourable light. In another survey in 2014, 50% of Russians confirmed the emergence of the "cult of personality" of President Putin. For sceptics or neutral observers, mass media in Russia instils the idea of a lack of an alternative to Putin or that the current president is a guarantee that the situation will not get worse. The strategy seems to work, as public surveys show a dramatic decline in those who do not want Putin to run for another term in office in 2018, from 47% in 2013 to 25% in 2015.

Beyond the development of a cult of a patriotic leader, the Kremlin is busy trying to institute patriotic education on many levels. In 2014, the president approved the "Basics of State Cultural Policy", which targets various levels of society. A state programme for patriotic education through 2020 is in the pipeline. In 2015, the Kremlin organized a seminar for local officials that included lectures on conservatism and contemporary history. The Kremlin splashed out money in 2015 for friendly NGOs that will work to promote "traditional values," advertise the Russian history of Crimea, and combat "extremism." The government also continued to allocate funds for the production of patriotically oriented movies (e.g., those featuring Crimea in Russian history). The authorities have an eye on their internet audience, too. The Kremlin is apparently behind a short video that plays up bellicose patriotism—"I am Russian Occupant"—which had 5 million YouTube views in less than a month.

Grim Prospects for Opposition. Russia's opposition is in tatters. Its rise has been largely contained in the outlying regions. One of its charismatic leaders, Nemtsov, was assassinated and there is no wide agreement yet to develop mid-term strategy on peaceful street politics. Without uniting, the opposition has no chance to forestall further consolidation of authoritarianism in Russia. Talks on running a single party list in the 2016 parliamentary elections is a move in the right direction but not enough. In 2015, there is the opportunity to use the economy's slowdown to promote a distinct economic agenda and recruit more popular support behind it. For this to happen, the opposition has to demonstrate creativity and persistence in outpacing the authorities' strategy of preemption. While the EU decries the mistreatment of the opposition in Russia, the answer to the question whether pluralism can endure and flourish again in Russia lies not outside, but inside the country.