

Why Honesty Is the Best Policy for Putin

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By Konstantin Sonin

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin would have a difficult time complying with some of the demands put forward by protesters in recent rallies — such as "Putin resign!" — but implementing others would actually be to his benefit.

For example, the demand that votes be counted honestly might increase his chances of losing on a second round of voting in the presidential election on March 4. But that risk is slight, and the alternative — a widespread impression that he had been elected through election fraud — would be far worse.

A leader who does not enjoy the support of the majority of the people can rule by force, but this is ineffective in the long term. Josef Stalin's iron-clad hold on power in the early 1930s may have helped give the country an initial boost in terms of rapid industrialization, but it ultimately deprived the country of the long-term growth it normally would have experienced as a result of making the transition from a rural to an urban society.

In the same way, Syrian President Bashar Assad's decision to remain in power at all costs is destructive not only because of the number of civilian deaths his regime has caused, but also because the entire country will be bogged down in an extremely unproductive struggle. The same is true of Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen. If there had been a normal transition of power in those countries 10 to 15 years ago, their citizens would not have had to devote so many years to first passive, and later active, resistance. But because the leaders of those states remained in power long after they had lost popular support, it will now take many years, if not decades, for citizens to restore normal development.

Free elections are an essential part of an effective government. During an election campaign, candidates gather information on issues of concern to voters and shape their platforms accordingly. On election day, voters choose the candidate who was most successful in doing this. Russia's task is not to find a way to move from poverty to a basic level of subsistence, or to make the transition from a primitive agrarian economy to an industrial one. The primary challenge facing the country is to progress from an average standard of living and level of development to a more advanced model of growth.

What could the authorities do now to make the March 4 election legitimate? At this point, only symbolic gestures are an option, such as firing Central Elections Commission chief Vladimir Churov and his direct reports. Because of its tarnished reputation, any election results the current commission announces will be rejected by many Russians, including some who are actually planning to vote for Putin on March 4.

Dismissing the top officials at the Central Elections Commission will send a clear signal to the management and employees of regional and district elections commissions: The votes must be counted honestly.

Of course, if someone of impeccable integrity were to head the Central Elections Commission, Putin would risk losing the election, particularly if the protest vote is large enough to support the other contender, regardless of who it is, in the second round.

But, at the same time, if Russians suspect that Putin won the election through electoral falsification, they will refuse to acknowledge his third presidential term as legitimate.

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