

Timothy Colton

Dean, Department of Political Science, Harvard University

“A Fracture in Putin’s Political System?”

The State Duma elections in Russia in December 2011 resulted in a substantial drop in the number of seats held by the ruling Unified Russia Party. Following the announcement of the election results, a series of demonstrations protesting election irregularities broke out in Moscow, Saint Petersburg and other major cities. The “near-certain” return of Putin to the presidency has suddenly taken a doubtful turn; the Putin “system” previously regarded as rock-solid could even be said to be exhibiting a “fracture.” Why did this “fracture” occur? How serious is it? Could this “fracture” widen in future? I would like to address these questions today.

The direct cause for the ruling party’s recent loss of seats and the subsequent demonstrations is likely Putin’s plan to return to the presidency announced at the Unified Russia Party Conference last September. This plan entails President Medvedev stepping down as a candidate in the next presidential election in favor of Prime Minister Putin, in exchange for which Putin would appoint Medvedev as prime minister if United Russia were to win the State Duma elections and Putin were to be elected president. What’s more, it was added in explanation that this plan to exchange places between president and prime minister was a decision made “behind closed doors” between Putin and Medvedev, disappointing not only Medvedev’s elite supporters but the general populace as well.

Why did the Putin-Medvedev tandem administration, particularly adept at image strategy, so ineptly announce Putin’s re-appearance? Medvedev’s explanation of Putin’s comeback plan was clearly inadequate, giving one the sense that a minute “fracture” has appeared in the tandem administration.

A “fracture” has also emerged within the ranks of the elite supporting this tandem administration. A good example of this is provided perhaps by the fuss surrounding the

dismissal of the previous finance minister Alexei Kudrin. Putin's return to the presidency itself had been anticipated by many Russians, but people's reactions would likely have been different had the announcement been the outcome of a more formal approach, e.g., had party members had been asked for their approval at the party conference.

The recent demonstrations clearly illustrated the existence of a "fracture" between the administration and the general public that cannot be overlooked. An unwritten social contract has been in place in Russia since the inauguration of the Putin administration. The government is to guarantee people economic freedom, in return for the people abiding by the government's oppressive policies. The recent demonstrations suggest that a "fracture" has occurred in this unwritten promise.

The lives of the Russian people changed greatly after the turn of the millennium. Many people saw their livelihoods improve by leaps and bounds as the economy boomed. Good indicators of this include the explosive spread of the Internet and cell phone usage and the substantial increase in the number of Russians traveling abroad. Political freedom, on the other hand, has suffered. The Putin administration has implemented one policy after another to strengthen the authority of the central government. Putin himself justifies this by declaring that conditions in Russia immediately after he became president required a political crackdown for the sake of social stability, as ongoing political turmoil since the breakup of the Soviet Union was moving the country towards collapse.

However, the administration's explanation met with an increasingly skeptical reception by a public whose political awareness had risen as it enjoyed the benefits of economic freedom. Dissatisfaction with the government has been particularly conspicuous since 2010 among highly educated urban youth engaged in vigorous discussions on the Internet. Criticism has risen of Putin, who did not describe the image in which he would like to remake Russia once "stability" had been achieved through political crackdowns. As you know, the latest demonstrations grew via use of the Internet. This change in political awareness has become the driving power behind the public's assertive "no!" to the long-time ruling establishment.

The administration has been fretting over how to respond to the dissatisfaction clearly indicated in these demonstrations. Even while rejecting a redo or a recount of the State Duma elections, President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin have laid out revisions to their earlier policies, promising to reform the law on political parties, resurrect direct election

of governors, and establish public broadcast organizations. They are also exploring possible dialogue with demonstration leaders and non-ruling parties as well as establishing a coalition government.

Nevertheless, there remain doubts about just how well these approaches will work. The administration may seek out dialogue with the leaders of the demonstrations, but who is leading these demonstrations is by no means clear. A coalition government with opposition parties also presents problems as Putin's efforts to eliminate opposition have been so thorough that there is no opposition party within the Duma capable of taking up the people's dissatisfaction and thus no partners with whom to form a coalition. The administration must keep the demonstrators in check even while carefully allaying their dissatisfaction, and it faces some difficult maneuvering in this regard.

Over the past ten years Putin has sought to build a full-blown ruling structure that concentrates authority in his own hands, all the while closing his eyes to the corruption arising around him in the course of this power grab. This is now coming back to haunt Putin. Putin will likely be re-elected in the March presidential election but his previous approaches will no longer work; Putin himself will have to change. The key questions to be asked are whether Putin can move away from a micromanaging style and delegate more authority, and whether he can take resolute action against the corruption surrounding him.