

Putin's Plan

Some of the uncertainty surrounding Russia's political future has passed. The December 2007 parliamentary elections are history, the presidential succession seems clear, and the range of options for Vladimir Putin's future role has been considerably narrowed. Yet, at each turn, other uncertainties remain and new ones arise.

In the eyes of most of the outside world, at least those of Europe and the United States, the Russian electoral process so far has failed to measure up to benchmarks of democracy and free choice of policies and personalities. Rather, this process has been about legitimizing the notion of entrusting the country's future to something called "Putin's Plan," thus ensuring *preyemstvennost' politiki* (continuity of policy) beyond the scheduled end of Putin's term of office in May 2008.

What exactly is Putin's Plan, and from where does it come? What are its goals? What are its implications for Russia's domestic and international relations?

Putin's Political Course: A Different Kind of Plan

The phrase "Putin's Plan" was introduced into political vocabulary by the chairman of the United Russia party, Boris Gryzlov, in a speech in May 2007.¹ Although the term was new, Gryzlov emphasized that the concept was not. It had been "in effect since 2000," he said. Yet, when pressed more recently to specify what it is,

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Gryzlov admits that it does not exist as a defined statement. “Putin’s Plan is simply the political course of the current president.... Putin is the leader in charge of national strategy and this is why we have dubbed his ideas ‘Putin’s Plan.’”²

Putin’s Plan, in other words, is whatever Putin thinks and wants, and the Russian public seems to know this. In October 2007, a poll reported that the overwhelming majority of Russians could not describe Putin’s Plan or had even heard of it. Yet, an equally large majority was nevertheless confident that Putin had one.³ Furthermore, as the results of the December parliamentary elections showed, Russians want the country to be guided by that strategy, whatever it is.

Putin’s chosen successor in the office of president, Dmitry Medvedev, clearly recognizes the inseparability of Putin’s Plan from the person of Putin himself. After accepting the endorsement of the United Russia party and repeatedly thereafter, Medvedev assured Russians that he would faithfully continue Putin’s strategic course and that he would need to do

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that in close cooperation with the “author of that strategy.”⁴

The cloudiness of Gryzlov’s and Medvedev’s references to Putin’s Plan should make it clear that although talk of the Plan with a capital P might evoke memories of Russia’s Soviet history, Putin’s Plan is different. In the Soviet Union, the famous five-year plans became the foremost symbol and feature of society as a whole. Those plans were highly precise and comprehensive. The Soviet Union was, after all, a centrally planned economy, and the plans did very much control everything. They included targets for the inputs and outputs of virtually every major item produced and consumed in the country.

Putin’s concept of planning is nothing like that, and it has very different roots. Its roots lie not in Marxism-Leninism but in Western business theory via a book with which he most likely became acquainted during his KGB career. The KGB in which Putin trained and served, Yuri Andropov’s KGB, was at the forefront of the search for an answer to the Soviet economic dilemma in the post-Stalin era, namely how to achieve increased efficiency without losing control. Part of that effort involved canvassing Western literature on theories of planning as applied to large corporations and other organizations. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a handful of the most relevant foreign texts were translated into Russian in limited editions. One of those works, *Strategic Planning and Policy* by William R. King and David I. Cleland of the University of Pittsburgh,⁵ turned out to be the one later used extensively by Putin several years after he had left the KGB in a dissertation he presented for his post-graduate economics degree.

Putin's dissertation, entitled "Strategic Planning of the Reproduction of the Mineral Resource Base of a Region,"⁶ later received attention because of the prescience Putin displayed in choosing the topic of natural resources and their role in Russia's economy at a time before he was even considered for a post at the national government level. Equally important was that he had based his work on the specific notion of strategic planning defined by King and Cleland, namely planning for an unpredictable, changing environment.

In retrospect, the particular appeal of the King and Cleland text to an enlightened segment of the Soviet elite is clear. In the early 1980s, the Soviet Union had been shocked by an unexpected collapse of world oil prices. The resulting changes in the world economy wrought havoc on the USSR and its ability to sustain its empire, in large part simply because the country's leadership had failed to be flexible enough in its plans. This book spoke exactly to that point: true strategic planning has to take into account unforeseen changes. Even the best detailed plans are useless if the assumptions on which they are based, explicitly or implicitly, are rendered false by circumstances outside one's own control. What was needed was an approach that could accommodate such changes.

The intellectual origins of his notion of management shed light on Putin's future leadership style:

If the organization is to be effective in the long run ... organizational changes must be *contrived responses to anticipated future environments* rather than conditioned responses to the past and current environmental situations. However, since the future environments on which the plans are based are necessarily uncertain ... the plans should be *adaptable* to the evolving circumstances. Viewed in this way, plans are not irrevocable guides from which deviation is sinful; rather, they are adaptive mechanisms that should permit the organization to confidently face an uncertain environment.⁷

Putin's appreciation for planning under conditions of uncertainty undoubtedly grew after the collapse of the Soviet Union, not least as a result of his own experience in helping to manage the economy of the city of St. Petersburg in the tumultuous and unpredictable years from 1991 to 1997, when it seemed nothing could be taken for granted and any one of a number of sudden and unexpected changes could bring catastrophe.

Change versus Stability

There is, however, a dilemma inherent in this kind of planning under uncertainty. To be most easily understood and capable of smooth implementation, a plan has to be detailed, clear, and precise. Yet, the more precise the plan is,

the more it reflects a “single image of the future,” the more vulnerable it is to unexpected changes in the external circumstances.⁸

The answer, wrote King and Cleland (and after them, Putin), is that true strategic planning should not aim at producing a single, simple plan but rather establish a hierarchical system of interrelated subplans that address different dimensions of the problems being faced. The system starts from the

Putin is orchestrating an election to succeed him as strategic planner, the CEO of ‘Russia Inc.’

very top by defining the most enduring objectives and moves downward to more and more detailed, time-specific tasks. Planning proceeds through a series of phases. It begins by defining the organization’s mission (in a “challenging, even shocking” statement that “tells what it is, why it exists, and the unique contribution it can make”) and then sets objectives (“broad and timeless statements” of destinations to be achieved), goals (“specific, time-based points of measurement” that are to be stated “as spe-

cifically and as quantitatively as possible”), and, finally, investment programs and projects (“identifiable activities pursuing specific goals with identifiable resources”).⁹

Responsibility for managing the various levels of plans falls to different levels of the organizational hierarchy. The most important division in this respect is between the very highest level, that of strategic planner, and the so-called operational managers. The strategic planner defines the mission of the organization and formulates its objectives. He ensures that the objectives, goals, programs, and projects are consistent with the overall mission and serve to fulfill it. There is only one strategic planner; in the corporation, it is the CEO.

Fundamentally, the division between the strategic planner and the operational managers also has to do with uncertainty. Programs and projects—day-to-day tasks—should be free of uncertainty. People should be able to focus on a task and ignore the possibility that the environment can radically change. That can only work if, at the higher level, the strategic planner (the CEO) assumes full responsibility for making the adjustments needed when they are needed. In other words, the task of coping with uncertainty is concentrated at the top. The strategic planner defines a course that appears stable and predictable to those below, while actually leaving room for adjustment, even radical shifts, if needed.

As president of Russia, Putin has not only assumed the role of strategic planner, but he has also followed this logical order of planning remarkably closely. On the eve of his assumption of office as acting president on January 1, 2000, he issued his mission statement: “Russia on the Threshold of the Mil-

lennium,” a visionary document produced with the assistance of his newly established Center for Strategic Reform.¹⁰ The Center for Strategic Reform was initially headed by the future minister of economic development and trade, German Gref.¹¹ In this so-called Millennium Statement, Putin pledged first to give Russians what they long for most of all: “stability, certainty, and the possibility of planning for the future—their own and that of their children—not one month at a time, but for years and decades.”¹² He identified the long-term objective of restoring Russia’s status as a great power and the well-being of its people and also for the first time set up a time-specific goal of bringing Russia’s per capita gross domestic product (GDP) to the level of Portugal by the year 2015. (In his 2003 address to the Federal Assembly, Putin would revise that goal to be a doubling of the GDP by 2010.) Programs and projects have followed in abundance, most notably the four so-called national projects (in agriculture, housing, education, and health care) articulated by Putin in 2004 and subsequently placed under Medvedev’s leadership.

Politics in Service of the Plan

One of the major themes of Putin’s Millennium Statement was the need for unity and cohesion in Russian society if the nation’s destiny was to be fulfilled and the objectives met. In Putin’s scheme, parties and electoral politics play a specific role in this regard. Political parties must serve the objective of unity and stability, something they cannot do if they primarily present competing policies and platforms. Rather, the purpose of political parties becomes to mold a diverse electorate into a unified body of support for his policy.

This suggests one reason why three other parties in addition to United Russia were allowed to make it into the Duma. The Kremlin’s democracy managers pragmatically understand that one party cannot appeal to all segments of the Russian electorate. Vladimir Zhirinovskiy’s Liberal Democratic Party, which won 8.1 percent of the vote in the December 2007 parliamentary election, helps address the most xenophobic and nationalist constituencies while the Communists and Just Russia, which received 11.6 percent and 7.7 percent of the vote, respectively, appeal to poorer and older voters.

At the staged event at which four party leaders announced their support for Medvedev’s candidacy and “urged” Putin to do the same, Putin identified a similar role for the approved “opposition” parties in the presidential election: “The fact that this proposal comes from representatives of four parties [that] unquestionably are based on the most different strata of Russian society and represent the interests of various groups of the population of Russia—all that tells us that we together have a chance to form a stable regime [*vlast*] in the Russian Federation after the March 2008 elections.”¹³

Nonetheless, the most reliable guarantee of unity is the thoroughly dominant role of a single party, the aptly named United Russia, which received 64.2 percent of the vote in the December 2007 election. Because the plan changes, it is essential to have a vehicle to educate and mobilize. United Russia's role, therefore, is to publicize the appropriate level of the plan and mobilize support for it, that is, to give it legitimacy. It will do it either directly with its own substantial membership or by recommending policies to be seconded by the other parties.

Putin and his colleagues believe that Russia lost its sovereignty in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Some around Putin believe United Russia must play this role for decades at least, giving it a status similar to that of the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan or the Institutional Revolutionary Party in Mexico. This vision accords with that espoused by the Kremlin's chief political strategist, Vladislav Surkov, deputy chief of staff of the presidential administration, when in February 2006 he admonished members that their goal was not simply to pre-

vail in the upcoming parliamentary elections, but to serve as Russia's ruling party for the next generation or so.¹⁴

This vision of United Russia ruling for several decades in order to oversee the nation's revival reflects the mentality of today's ruling elite. Most of them were born in the 1950s and 1960s, so it is natural for them to view their leadership taking Russia to 2020–2030. In their view, the task of maintaining continuity of policy and, specifically, of the individuals who are responsible for shaping that policy is not something that can be left to democratic politics. True to the roots of his notion of strategic planning, Putin is orchestrating the election of someone to succeed him as strategic planner, the CEO of Russia Incorporated. In fact, in a statement concerning the parliamentary elections that was remarkable in its frankness, Central Election Commission Chairman Vladimir Churov said as much when he told NTV on August 31, 2007, that Russia has formed “a corporate state”: “We have a state corporation and we are electing the top management of our state corporation.”¹⁵

The crux of Russia's domestic political dilemma now is that, according to the statutes of Russia Inc.—the country's December 1993 constitution—the current CEO, Putin, must step down after eight years. As of now, it appears that Putin is attempting to resolve this dilemma by entrusting the office of president to his longtime protégé Medvedev, while he himself assumes the post of prime minister. A recent public opinion poll suggests Russian society is prepared to accept Medvedev as chief executive and prefers stability over the risk of reconfiguring the Russian political system.¹⁶ Perhaps most significantly, 80 percent of those polled

expect Medvedev to continue to implement Putin's Plan. Whether or not Putin intends to relinquish his real role to Medvedev remains uncertain. For now, Putin is keeping all options open, likely waiting to see how circumstances play out and perhaps to judge whether Medvedev is capable not merely of implementing Putin's Plan but of independently adapting it to changing circumstances, the quality that distinguishes the true strategic planner.

Searching for External Stability

Stability inside Russian society has been Putin's first priority. Yet, as demonstrated in the Soviet Union in the 1980s and Russia in the 1990s, the source of greatest uncertainty lies in the external environment. From the 1997 Asian financial crisis that catalyzed Russia's default a year later to the support of international terrorist networks for the opposition in the Chechen war to the perception of the West's role in promoting "Color revolutions" in the former Soviet Union, Putin could confirm that Russia is dangerously vulnerable to "uncontrollable environmental forces in the outside environment."¹⁷

Putin's conviction that a nation can make meaningful plans for the future only to the extent that it has control over its own fate bears on his repeated references to and particular definition of the notion of sovereignty. For him and most of the Russian elites, sovereignty means being able to shape one's own destiny independently. It is often defined in negative terms: let no one else determine Russia's fate. Putin and his colleagues believe that Russia essentially lost its sovereignty in the late 1980s and 1990s under Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin.

Russia's greatest weakness was its financial state, and its removal was a precondition for dealing with other weaknesses. When Putin assumed the post of prime minister in August 1999, Russia was bankrupt and effectively in receivership. The nation owed \$16.6 billion to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) alone, while its foreign currency reserves were under \$8 billion and shrinking. Prospects for easily turning the situation around seemed dim.

What would eventually change the situation was the boom in world oil prices. Putin had initially benefited from a rebound in oil prices as he became prime minister in August 1999. The \$20 per barrel price of Urals oil at that time was twice what it had been barely a year before, and the upward trend continued. By September 2000, it was up to more than \$35 a barrel. Then it turned downward again, dipping under \$17 a barrel by June 2002, before booming again in mid-2004.

Such uncertainty over Russia's oil wealth dictated a very conservative policy of financial management. A stabilization fund was established in January 2004 to absorb the extra profits of the oil companies and redirect them to

paying off the country's foreign debt. The subsequent surge in oil prices then greatly accelerated Russia's capacity to restore financial sovereignty. On January 31, 2005, Russia paid off the entire balance of Russia's debt to the IMF three and a half years ahead of schedule. In the summer of 2006, it paid off the remaining \$23 billion of debt owed to the Paris Club creditors.

Restoring financial sovereignty went hand in hand with Russia's perception of restoring its international political sovereignty. It is not a coincidence that the controversial term "sovereign democracy" entered the Russian political lexicon in 2005–2006, at the same time

Moscow's core concern is the risks to stability of the interdependent global economy.

its financial dependence on the West was removed. The Kremlin's newfound sovereignty was boosted by the downturn in the momentum of regional Color revolutions beginning in the second half of 2006.¹⁸ The Kremlin viewed Western-supported nongovernmental organizations in Georgia, Ukraine, and Russia itself as threats to regional stability and thus to the very sovereignty of the Russian Federation.

Having regained financial independence, Russia now faces the question of how to deal with the changes that took place in its environment during its period of financial weakness that began in the late 1980s. Today's Russia regards many elements of the international system that evolved during that period of weakness as illegitimate. This is most evident on a range of security issues including Kosovo, the role of NATO, missile defense, the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty, and others where the United States (in particular with the usual accusation of unilateralism) and the West are viewed as having taken undue advantage of Russia. With every action that Russia takes to defy the existing order, there are stronger calls from Western countries to exclude Russia further from the international system. In return, Russian rhetoric has heated up.

Putin alarmed many in the West with his sharp criticism of U.S. foreign policy in his February 2007 speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy. At the core of Putin's frustration and anger is his view of the United States dangerously intervening into the sovereign affairs of others: "[T]he United States has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations."¹⁹ This speech and subsequent remarks by Putin and other Kremlin leaders later in 2007 sparked a furor in Western policy circles and endless commentary about an alleged "new Cold War." Russia and the West seem to be at an impasse.

A Stake in the International Economic System

A possible first step to break through this impasse is to acknowledge Russia's quest for stability and to recognize that its core concern is the risks to stability represented by the interdependent global economy. The growing mismatch between economic power and the architecture of international economic relations has become a popular theme for Putin. In that same Munich speech, Putin noted:

The combined GDP measured in purchasing power parity [PPP] of countries such as India and China is already greater than that of the United States. And a similar calculation with the GDP of the BRIC countries—Brazil, Russia, India and China—surpasses the cumulative GDP of the [European Union]. And according to experts this gap will only increase in the future.... There is no reason to doubt that the economic potential of the new centres of global economic growth will inevitably be converted into political influence and will strengthen multipolarity.²⁰

Russia today finds itself regaining economic strength faster than anyone inside or outside of the Kremlin expected. In less than 10 years, Russia has emerged from bankruptcy to being one of the largest financiers of the U.S. current account deficit. Now the ninth-largest economy in the world according to PPP GDP estimates, Russia has set itself the goal of advancing to fifth place by 2020. By that time, Moscow projects itself to be one of the world's top five financial centers.²¹ To many skeptics in the Washington policy community, this sounds like a fairy tale. Yet, much of the Russian and international investment banking community and large multinational companies take these projections quite seriously.²²

It is in this context of rapid recovery and perception of the lack of a voice in reforming the international order for the last 20 years that the campaign message taken from a United Russia 2007 campaign brochure entitled "Putin's Plan: Victory of Russia" can be interpreted: "[This means] victory in the competitive battle of leading world powers. The result of this victory will be a dignified place for Russia in the international division of labor and distribution of assets.... The victory of Russia is a new architecture of the world in which our country can influence global politics for the benefit of security and the well-being of its citizens."²³

In Putin's view, it is not just Russia's reversal of fortune that calls for a new architecture. Russia's resurgence is just a piece, albeit a significant one, of a changing global economic balance of power or, to put it in economic terms, a massive wealth transfer. So far, the principal beneficiaries have been the major oil exporters and large emerging market economies. Russia fits prominently into both categories.

In his speech at the St. Petersburg World Economic Forum in June 2007, Putin elaborated on the nature of change he envisioned:

The new architecture of economic relations implies a principally new approach to the work of international organizations. It has become increasingly apparent of late that the existing organizations are not always up to the measure in regulating global international relations and the global market. Organizations originally designed with only a small number of active players in mind sometimes look archaic, undemocratic, and unwieldy in today's conditions. They are far from taking into consideration the balance of force [sic] that has emerged in the world today.²⁴

Putin's words were put into practice a few weeks later when Russia surprisingly nominated former governor of the Czech National Bank Jozef Tosovsky as an alternative candidate to the EU-supported Frenchman Dominique Strauss-Kahn for managing director of the IMF. The Russians wanted to make the point that the selection process was unfair, but they also believed that Tosovsky was a more qualified candidate given his performance over Czech finances during the challenging transitional period of the 1990s. Much of the initial response by the press and pundits either dismissed this act as just more Russian meddling and blustering or as an effort to woo the Czech government away from deploying a U.S. theater missile defense radar. A *Financial Times* editorial, however, got it right:

It is depressing when the Russian executive director speaks more sense about the future of the International Monetary Fund than does the [EU]. Yet Alexei Mozhin did so when he criticized the EU's decision to foist ... Strauss-Kahn ... on the IMF. Only those who want the Fund to be irrelevant can applaud the decision. This is the wrong candidate, chosen in the wrong way. Mr. Mozhin was right when he said "the IMF is facing a severe crisis of legitimacy." He was correct to insist that "we must select the best candidate" if the institution is to remain relevant for developing countries.²⁵

The "crisis of legitimacy" is especially acute at the IMF in large part because its voting power quotas are so convoluted and archaic. China's voting share of 3.7 percent is less than that of France or the United Kingdom, with 4.9 percent each, and India's 1.9 percent is less than Belgium's 2.1 percent. Global wealth is moving east and south, whereas the IMF distribution of voting power reflects the latter days of the colonial era. This deficit of legitimacy spills over to the World Bank, with the cozy 60-year-old agreement that an American heads the World Bank and a western European leads the IMF.

Russia's proposal was defeated in the end, thanks to the unbalanced voting system that gives the EU and the United States more than 49 percent of the

vote. Yet, many developing and emerging market countries, including China and India, followed Russia's lead in support of the Tosovsky nomination. As a result of this episode, it is more likely today that the multitude of structural challenges the IMF faces to maintain legitimacy and budgetary financing will be addressed sooner rather than later. In the opinion of Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker of Luxembourg, the Strauss-Kahn appointment would likely be the last time the head of the IMF was selected according to the existing rules and conventions.²⁶

The Tosovsky case demonstrates an instance of the Russian government taking a genuinely constructive initiative on an issue of global significance. Russia is integrated into the world economy today more deeply than ever. It recognizes the importance of financial stability and the need to reform global institutions, not only to reflect a changing economic order but also because new tools are required

to address new challenges. To their credit, today's Russian leaders have learned much from the mistakes that their Soviet predecessors made during the Cold War. One such mistake was Moscow's decision not to take part in the establishment of the Bretton Woods system in 1944. There is increasing recognition around the world that the Bretton Woods institutions for global economic management require a major overhaul, and the United States should welcome the fact that Russia is emerging on the scene as a constructive player in this endeavor.

Putin believes that the U.S. is simply not capable of keeping the global system stable.

Minimizing Future Risks

Russians have learned that the vagaries of the modern global economy can pose as great a threat to a nation's existence as do military threats. The Soviet Union survived World War II, but it could not survive a collapse of world oil prices. During Putin's tenure, therefore, the Russians have acted to insulate themselves better, making the economy and society as robust as possible to external shocks.

Increasingly, however, Russia has come to realize that a purely defensive and inward-oriented approach is not enough. Russia is increasingly linked to the international economy, and if growth is to continue, that trend cannot be reversed. Indeed, it is accelerating as Russian companies and capital seek trade and investment opportunities abroad. Consequently, Russia will have to play an active role in promoting global stability. This realization fuels many of Putin's critical comments about the U.S. role in world affairs. Putin believes that

the United States is simply not capable of keeping the global system stable. Moreover, if a crisis does happen, the current unipolar system will inevitably result in an attempt by the dominant nation to secure its own interests first, even at the expense of others.

Putin's Plan, as such, may or may not endure, as it is dependent on the future political role of Putin himself. Whatever Russian politician assumes the role of strategic planner, however, the goals of long-term stability and predictability will endure because the Russian people want their children to live better and their country to endure as a strong power. External events combined with governmental incompetence conspired to thwart this goal twice in the twentieth century, nearly 100 years ago with World War I and a little more than 20 years ago with the collapse of oil prices. Putin and his colleagues will continue to seek to minimize the risk of major internal and external shocks disrupting Russia's stable growth path.

Notes

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