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PUTIN MAY HAVE FINALLY RUN OUT OF GAS

JOSHUA L. WILCZYNSKI[†]

Russia experienced great change in the 90s after the fall of the Soviet Union with both Yeltsin's rapid push towards a market-based economy and privatization (A) and later with ex-KGB Vladimir Putin's swift cuts to the freedoms enjoyed by the "oligarchs."¹

Putin served two four-year terms as president from 2000 to 2008.² Putin loyalist Dmitry Medvedev took over as president in 2008 with Putin as Prime Minister. This puppet presidency, along with Putin's run for the 2012 presidency, came as little surprise to the international community since only consecutive terms are limited. There are no limits to nonconsecutive terms, and new reforms³ allow Putin the potential for two additional consecutive six-year terms.⁴

At first glance one would think that the people of Russia would be tired of Putin and his manipulation of the electoral system. However, the people of Russia have remained loyal and without major discontent since 2000. This all changed after the December Duma elections (parliamentary elections) as critics and protesters felt the election was rigged.⁵ Protests erupted and calls for legitimacy were made. The Kremlin responded with internet attacks to censor opposition.⁶ These bold acts only bolstered the reputation of the United Russia party as a party of "crooks and thieves."⁷

The December election gained the attention of the normally placid middle class.⁸ For over ten years the middle class has remained largely unfazed by Putin's stronghold over Russia. However, the December elections drew some of the largest protests since the fall of the Soviet Union and gave the middle class a much needed reason to voice their concerns and be heard by the very government that has been

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¹ For an example of silencing the oligarchs, see Russia's takeover of Yukos Oil. *Russia Country Profile*, BBC News (Dec. 8, 2011, 10:24 GMT), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country_profiles/1102275.stm.

² Putin currently represents the United Russia Party. Term limits in Russia limit the presidency to two four-year terms. *Id.*

³ The new term limit will be two consecutive six-year terms. *Id.*

⁴ If re-elected in 2012, Putin has the potential to be president until 2024. *Id.*

⁵ For example, ballot stuffing was found throughout the country with some areas receiving over 140% turnout, near 99.5% turnout at some hospitals, and an overall estimated vote inflation of 5 to 15%. See *Political Crisis In Russia: Voting, Russian-Style*, Economist (Dec. 10, 2011), <http://www.economist.com/node/21541455>.

⁶ For example, social media networks and election monitors were targeted. *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ The middle class represents between 20 to 25% of the Russian population. *The Birth of Russian Citizenry: The Kremlin Stands Apparently Firm but Is Worried by Middle-Class Protests*, Economist (Dec. 17, 2011), <http://www.economist.com/node/21541877>.

steadily consolidating power within the country with little benefit being seen by the middle class.⁹ This middle class now seeks respect and legitimate leadership.¹⁰

Protesters also called for a “rerun” of the December election.¹¹ However, Putin rejected this notion and has instead shifted blame to the protesters themselves.¹² Police action has also been increased to stifle protests and incarcerate protesters.¹³

Putin’s nearly-assured 2012 presidency is now left tainted with the glaring possibility that the mighty and powerful Putin may finally have to take his place in the unemployment line.¹⁴

⁹ A single demonstration on December 24th drew an estimated 80,000 protesters. *First We Take Sakharov Avenue: The Capital Sees Its Biggest Demonstration Yet Against the Kremlin*, Economist (Dec. 31, 2011), <http://www.economist.com/node/21542205>.

¹⁰ *The Birth*, *supra* note 8 (noting worries about the middle class).

¹¹ *Russia Election: Vladimir Putin Rejects Poll Review*, BBC News (Dec. 27, 2011, 7:04 ET), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-16337298>.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *See Moscow Rally Halted amid Arrests*, BBC News (Dec. 31, 2011, 11:26 ET), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-16374186>.

¹⁴ Some critics concede that Putin will still win the 2012 election regardless of the latest protests and calls for legitimacy. *First We Take Sakharov Avenue*, *supra* note 9. *Editor’s note*: Since the time this Feature was initially published, Putin has in fact been elected, and the protests continue.