

## Efforts to isolate the opposition in Russia have left Vladimir Putin's regime with little margin for error.

Blog Admin

*Last year saw extensive protests in Russia, and efforts by President Vladimir Putin's government to isolate its opposition. [Sean Roberts](#) writes that while these efforts have been moderately successful, they may undermine the pro-Putin consensus, and require reworking in the future. Putin now has little room to make further mistakes if his government wants to avoid a resurgent protest movement.*

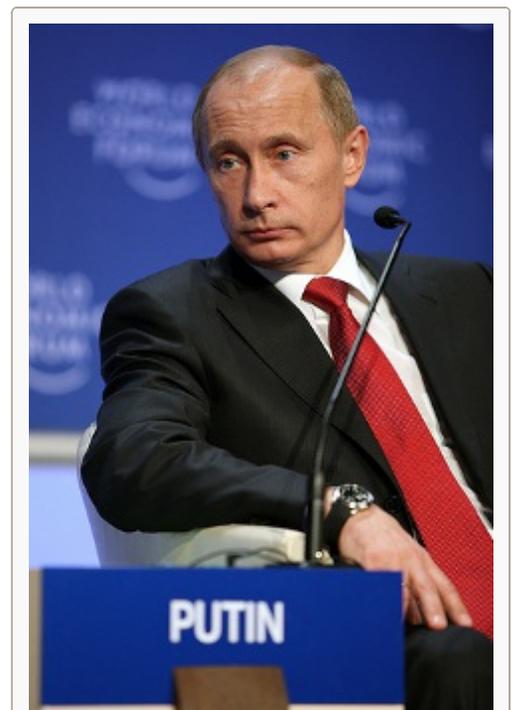


If the first few weeks of 2013 are anything to go by then we should expect to see a continuation of the protests that came to define Russian politics in 2012. On January 13, around 25,000 protestors (turnout remains highly contested) took to the streets of Moscow to express their dismay at the so-called Dima Yakovlev law banning US citizens from adopting Russian orphans. At the same time, the newly-formed opposition Coordination Council announced plans for further mass actions in coming months, as the protest movement looks to step up the pressure for political reform. But has this reawakening of independent political activity had any positive impact on political processes over the past 12 months?

While there is no denying the scale and frequency of the protests that followed United Russia's [fraudulent](#) election victory on December 4, 2011, the short-term results remain modest, with little evidence of broadening public support. Positive achievements, such as the formation of the opposition Coordination Council in October 2012 are balanced by internal ideological divisions which preclude all but a negative and narrowly focused anti-Putin agenda. Moreover, the effectiveness of the protest movement has almost certainly suffered at the hands of the authorities, who sensing a general dissipation of the protest atmosphere in the second half of 2012, launched its own counter-offensive.

Since May 2012, the incoming Putin administration has taken a number of measures as part of a larger strategy to 'isolate' the protest movement from wider political processes. Part of this strategy has involved carefully calibrated political reforms designed to boost United Russia's electoral prospects while presenting a progressive image of change. The reform of the party system and the reconstitution of direct governor elections are cases in point, seemingly liberal on the outside, but with enough contingency and small print to tilt the electoral playing field in favour of the authorities. It is of little surprise that the regional elections in October saw a strong performance by United Russia, while the five gubernatorial elections resulted in convincing victories by pro-Kremlin candidates.

Alongside these pseudo reforms, the authorities have also passed a number of laws that redefine state-society relations and address some of the vulnerabilities of the regime. In the summer of 2012, legislators passed a controversial law requiring foreign-funded NGOs engaged in 'political activities' to voluntarily register with the Ministry of Justice as ['foreign agents'](#) or ['foreign spies'](#) depending on how the phrase is understood in Russian. The independent election watchdog, Golos, which did so much to report fraud in the December 2011 State Duma election presented itself as an obvious motivation for this law. Legislators also beefed up existing laws



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regulating demonstrations, re-classified libel as a criminal offence and adopted a web blacklist bill. The loosely defined treason law signed by Putin in November 2012 was seen as the most serious among the growing list of restrictive laws.

The authorities have also got personal in their efforts to tackle the protest movement. As of January 2013, Alexei Navalny, the high-profile anti-corruption blogger and leader of the opposition Coordination Council is under investigation on three separate criminal charges. Interestingly, each charge relates to alleged corruption committed by Navalny, as the authorities attempt to re-take the moral high-ground and neutralise one of the few issues capable broadening the protest movement's popular support. Meanwhile, fellow Coordination Council leader, Sergei Udaltsov, is facing serious public disorder charges that, like Navalny, could result in a lengthy prison sentence. The overall strategy of isolating opponents has also involved a sustained effort by state-controlled media to reframe the protests as an American-backed 'contagion' and part of a wider plot to destabilise Russia. Thus, the protest movement is now caught in the cross-hairs of anti-American sentiment and a larger public fear of external threats, as the regime taps into old prejudices and stereotypes.

While the Putin administration may feel satisfied with its efforts in dealing with the protest movement, there have been enough unintended consequences to question the overall wisdom of this uncompromising approach. First, many of the restrictive laws passed in 2012 are poorly defined, borderline unconstitutional or just plain unworkable. There have already been reports that the Russian Justice Ministry is powerless to enforce the NGO 'foreign agent' law and it is not inconceivable that at least some of this hastily prepared legislation will require amending in the future. A second unintended consequence is the growing schism among the pro-regime elite that threatens to undermine the Putin consensus apparent during the past decade. Russia's so-called 'loyal' opposition parties, such as the Communists and A Just Russia are struggling to keep a lid on internal dissent as party activists demand less acquiescence and more protest from party leaders. More significantly, the Putin administration's tough line has altered the regime's delicate balance, marginalising the sizeable liberal-leaning elite who view Russia's prosperity and security tied to political modernisation.

Although the protest movement has made little immediate impact on political processes thus far, it is unclear what the longer-term effects will be. Of particular importance is how the regime's response to the first real political crisis of the post-Yeltsin period will serve to cut off future developmental paths. What is clear is that there is now a growing belief among the opposition that the Putin system is unreformable and that no amount of dialogue with the authorities will result in positive change. As for the regime, the failure to 'evolve' the political system and to make genuine reform has simply pushed the problem further down the road. In the current pressured political conditions, the regime has little room for error, as the next dubious election result, economic downturn or simple miscalculation by the Putin administration – such as the unfortunate adoption law – will likely bring people back to the streets in greater numbers than before.

*This article is based on the Finnish Institute of International Affairs briefing paper, [Russia's Pressure Politics](#).*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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