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Beom-Shik Shin

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The East Asia Institute
909 Sampoong B/D
310-68 Eulji-ro 158
Jung-gu
Seoul 100-786
Republic of Korea

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www.eai.or.kr

The Return of Old Putin and the New Future of Russia

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Vladimir Putin who cautiously entered the Kremlin upon his inauguration in March 2000 is now returning to the presidential office with more craft and determination this May 2012. Going by the announcements of Russia's Central Election Commission (CEC), Putin received 63.75% of the votes, defeating Gennady Zyuganov (17.19%), Mikhail Prokhorov (7.82%), Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (6.23%), Sergey Mironov (3.85%) and others to become the next president of the Russian Federation. It had been predicted that Putin would either win by a narrow margin after the second round of voting receiving around 40% of the votes, or he would have had an easy victory receiving around 50% of the votes. His victory though was an overwhelming one, with nearly 64% of the votes.

There were controversies nevertheless regarding election fraud. The international election monitoring team dispatched by Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) raised concerns over a number of issues such as questions over the neutrality of Vladimir Churov, the chair of CEC and restrictive media regulations for opposition candidates. Despite these concerns, it would be virtually impossible for opposition candidates to overturn the results. In expectation of such controversies, the Russian government made efforts to minimize criticism of election fraud by installing webcams in ballot boxes. However, rectifying the lack of a fair judgment system should be regarded as a task of utmost urgency if Russia's election system is to develop. Still, the disputes over election fraud will

go on for some time as will the street demonstrations against Putin that appeared after his victory.

Domestic Challenges for Putin's Russia

The outcome of this election reflects the apprehension of Russians toward the kind of regime instability experienced in the 1990s. When Putin came to power in 2000, he promised to overcome the negative experiences of hasty democratization and market reforms that had characterized the 1990s. He seemed to be well aware of the demands of the Russian people when he spoke of a "strong Russia" and "stability and order." His success in the 2012 election came again with promises of a "strong Russia" and "stable reforms." However, he must be aware that the demand for stability this time around is different from the past. If the demand for stability in 2000 was driven by the Russian people's despair of the political disorder and a semi-anomic society, the current demands are motivated more by the desire to see Russia undergo stable development and rejoin the ranks of advanced countries. Putin's election promises and policy aims, though, give off an impression that he is still bound to the old way of thinking.

The question then is, will political transformation in Russia be possible in the future? If so, under which conditions and what circumstances? The series of protests which followed the parliamentary elections in late 2011 indicates that it is not only the middle-class that is now having a say, but new political

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elites are also emerging. To offset future political disorder, systemic change will be required to enable these new political elites to enter into official political institutions. And such change can only happen if the election laws are amended and a mechanism for a fair election administration that allows diverse political forces to enter official institutions is expanded. Therefore Putin's success should not lead to solidification of the old elites' political power which would be viewed as a step back in the eyes of the people. Rather, as Putin returns to the Presidency, he must grow into the role of minimizing political instability by managing the new political changes and creating circumstances conducive to steady political development. Putin himself has acknowledged the need for a new impetus if Russia's modernization, which he passionately stands for, is to be achieved. Political liberalization will not be easy, but it is likely that Putin, the "wise leader" will be balanced enough to listen to the voices of young Russians and the new elites.

Diversification of political elites and the emergence of a new mainstream political force must also take place. Mikhail Prokhorov's success in securing third place in the election and his subsequent rise are noteworthy in this context. While Gennady Zyuganov ending up second is not a great surprise considering the fixed base of support the Communist Party enjoys, the political rookie Prokhorov's third-place finish ahead of numerous veteran politicians is a clear representation of the Russian people's desire for new political elites. Prokhorov and other new political elites who seek a middle-class-based liberal democracy will have to develop a political foundation and a new process of party politics by entering the Duma.

Will they however, be able to emerge as

victors in any confrontation with the old elites? The current *Siloviki* or politicians from military or security backgrounds and the oligarchy-based ruling elites are likely to maintain their influence for some time. As the street demonstrations show however, a new group of elites backed by the highly educated middle-class aspiring for a new Russia is likely to grow. This will eventually result in a gradual competition between the old and new elites which will fully materialize during the next Duma elections. The two Duma elections in the coming decade will therefore be crucial moments that could determine the direction of change in Russia's political climate for the long-term future. If the opportunities for new elites to enter into official political institutions increase, the political influence currently held only by the old elites will diminish in the early to mid-2020's which could result in a shift from the old elites to new ones. Once the new elites secure mainstream status, they could enhance the competition within the political system and embrace changes in an increasingly diversified society. Along with such change driven by the new elites, one of the most important tasks in establishing democratic governance will be improving the relative autonomy of Russia's regional governments and enhancing their relationship with the central government in Moscow. In order to achieve this, Russia will need to develop a sense of being a unitary state that recognizes its cultural diversity and goes beyond the narrow focus on maintaining territorial integration. Such a process will be contingent upon the support from regional administrative bodies with which the differences between central and local government must be resolved. The relationship between the central and regional governments, along with the potential shift in the positioning of mainstream political influ-

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ence will therefore be the most important issues in regard to Russia’s future political development.

The 2012 presidential election results also revealed the importance of regional politics. The anti-Putin campaign which consisted mainly of the urban middle-class failed to spread its influence to the rural regions. Public sentiment and political elites in the regions still seem to be strongly influenced by their fear of rapid change. Some view that the protests in the large cities were counter to the interests of the rural areas, particularly when considering that regional voters were the most powerful source of support for Putin’s presidential victory. Accordingly, the new elites must not be confined to only seeking Putin’s exit or changes in central politics. They must broaden their scope and propose a new direction which encompasses more diverse issues such as improved relations between the central and regional governments as well as a vision for new regional politics. Russia’s political progress can only materialize if a system of stable and democratic central-regional governance can be developed over the next decade when a new generation of mainstream elites is expected to emerge.

Foreign Policy Challenges for Putin’s Russia

It has been predicted by some that Vladimir Putin’s return to power will see Russia revert to a more aggressive foreign policy with strong anti-U.S. and anti-West characteristics. By actively pushing ahead with his foreign policy, Putin will be attempting to resolve domestic challenges. For Putin, it would be ideal if Russia was to participate as a superpower in what has hitherto been a bipolar world order between the United States and China. During his election campaign Putin

openly advocated for Russia to restore its past military strength by installing an additional 400 intercontinental ballistic missiles, 8 Borei-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines, and 600 aircrafts. He also made no effort to hide his discomfort with the interference by Western countries into Russia’s domestic affairs and made it clear that he will not tolerate this in the future. To presume however, that this means Russia’s foreign policy will become more aggressive toward the United States and the West would be a premature conclusion. While there is no doubt that Putin will seek to restore Russia’s status as a powerful nation and expand its global influence, it must be noted that the structure of its national interests has not significantly changed much from the past. President Dmitry Medvedev’s foreign policy was regarded as being milder but this was only possible after extensive discussion and compromise with Putin who was prime minister. Furthermore, Russia’s fundamental national interests do not change with the president. Russia’s foreign policy may change on a rhetorical level, but it will remain consistent in its general content. Moscow will continue to strengthen its voice on international affairs via energy diplomacy and military expansion will continue, but its regional policy will be based on utilitarianism.

The rise of China’s influence in Northeast Asia is of particular concern for Russia. Putin will therefore seek to amplify Russia’s presence and influence to ensure balance is maintained between China and the United States. In regards to the Korean Peninsula, Putin will continue to base his Korea policy on equal diplomacy toward the two Koreas in order to resolve issues such as North Korea’s nuclear program and the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. The likelihood of Russia taking on a vigorous approach toward the Korean

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Peninsula is also possible. Therefore, the way in which Russia will connect its policies on the Korean Peninsula with its development plans for Eastern Siberia should be closely analyzed. If the Trans-Korea Gas Pipeline construction, the plans to develop its eastern region's energy, distribution, agriculture and education, and Vladivostok development plans are all propelled towards establishing a balance of power in North Korea, the Korean Peninsula and East Asia, Russia's status and influence in the region will most certainly improve. It can therefore be expected that Putin will be very much interested in cooperating with South Korea.

In the end, rhetoric is not as important as the manner in which Putin defines Russia's national interests and devises policies to realize them. During his last term as president, Putin proved himself as a practical policy maker, willingly cooperating with countries that acknowledged Russia's national interests and made proposals that offered mutual benefits. If the United States recognizes Russia's national interests and encourages constructive input from Russia as a strategic actor, reasonable compromise and strategic cooperation will likely emerge. A similar approach will also help the South Korean government to induce Putin's foreign policy into making meaning contributions toward improving peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and eventually build a unified Korea.

Russia as the Big Empire

Russia is a big empire. Empires rarely change because of their external environment, more often than not they are transformed by internal logic. The impetus for Russia to change

therefore will not be external pressures, but rather domestic undercurrents. Russia's internal flux in 2012 which temporally coincided with Putin's return to power may not necessarily produce change for the new. It is nevertheless imperative not only for the international community but also for South Korea that Putin devises “prudent” policies that will manage Russia's new momentum for change and to maintain stability in domestic politics. As long as Russia's foreign policy is in favor of peace and stability in East Asia while maintaining a balance of power among the great powers, South Korea must continue to enhance its cooperation with Russia on a regional level. In particular, developing Eastern Siberia together with Russia contributes not only toward the stabilization of Russia's domestic situation, but will also help the East Asia region and induce North Korea to change. The new leaders who will be elected towards the end of 2012 in the United States and South Korea must accurately assess Russia's capacity and influence on both the global and regional level. From this they can then strengthen relations with the new Putin administration.■

— Professor Beom-Shik Shin received his Ph.D in political science at Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) and is currently a professor in the department of international relations at Seoul National University.