

The Beginning of the End for Vladimir Putin

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In a week, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin will be handed the victory he deserves. After all, never before has he had to work so hard to win a presidential race.

But the political cost of winning has been staggering, and its impact on Putin's legacy will be devastating. While posing as guarantor of political stability, Putin profoundly destabilized the country with his decision to return to the Kremlin and his scare tactics of an imminent Orange Revolution. He wound up dismantling the political institutions that have underpinned his system of "authoritarianism with the consent of the governed" for the past 12 years.

Putin has run away from his own party, United Russia, for fear that its sagging ratings might bring down his own. Handled wisely, United Russia could have become a vehicle for genuine political competition and a smooth transfer of power, not unlike the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan or the Chinese Communist Party. Instead, he allowed his party to earn the title "crooks and thieves" — and then he jumped ship.

He humiliated and belittled his hand-picked successor, Dmitry Medvedev, who was "rewarded" for his loyalty by having his presidency erased in line with the pathetic narrative of "only Putin can save Russia."

Instead of pulling the nation together to rise to global challenges, Putin engaged in cultural and class warfare, pitting the intelligentsia and middle class from metropolitan centers against the blue-collar crowds of the rural and industrial heartland. He will now preside over a bitterly divided country segregated into blue (metropolitan) and red (heartland) political blocs.

In a desperate electoral outreach, Putin abandoned his responsible centrism and began promising all things to all people in long-winded manifestos, while dodging the hard questions about how he was going to pay for all of these promises.

He has reduced Russian politics to a false choice between himself and chaos, safely eliminating Medvedev, the only credible alternative.

What's more, Putin's increasingly absurd campaign has tried to equate him with the Russian state, implying that God ordained him to rule Russia.

Putin emerges from this race all alone with his majority coalition dispersed and his political support sublimated by pre-paid adoration.

But by doing so, Putin has "won a victory over himself" and has shattered his own system. Putin is being elected to oversee its demise.

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