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Putin Blames Clinton for Vote Unrest

By Irina Filatova and Alexey Eremenko
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Prime Minister [Vladimir Putin](#) accused U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Thursday of instigating the public protests against the State Duma elections as tens of thousands signed up to rally over the weekend.

But Putin and President [Dmitry Medvedev](#) made ambiguous remarks about the protesters themselves, conceding that they have the right to rally but calling on the police to crack down on those who break the law.

Preparations were under way in Moscow for a new rally against the victory of Putin's United Russia party on Saturday, with almost 30,000 [signed up](#) on Facebook on late Thursday.

In what resembled an attempt to distance himself from the party, Putin also [said](#) his campaign staff for the presidential election in March would not be centered around United Russia but his All-Russia People's Front, and be headed by a prominent film director, not a party boss.

"I looked at the first reaction of our American partners. The first thing that the secretary of state did was characterize [the elections] as dishonest and unfair," Putin said at a meeting with the front's council on Thursday.

He said Clinton made her conclusions without reading reports from election monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and her words "gave a signal" to the Russian opposition.

"They heard this signal and started active work with the support of the U.S. Department of State," he said.

Putin said protest organizers were pursuing "selfish political goals," while most Russians did not want unrest.

"People in our country don't want the situation to develop like in Kyrgyzstan or Ukraine in the recent past. Nobody wants chaos," he said in reference to the "color revolutions" that swept several former Soviet republics in the mid-2000s.

Protests should not be obstructed as long as they are done within the law, and "we need to have a dialog with those who are opposition-minded and let them speak out," Putin said.

But police must stop any violations, he said.

Some 6,000 to 17,000 people protested the elections on Monday and Tuesday in Moscow, and hundreds more took to the streets throughout the country. Up to 1,000 have been arrested in the capital alone.

Preliminary results give United Russia 49.3 percent of the vote, but critics say up to half of that amount was gained through fraud, instances of which have been widely reported by individual observers and the country's sole independent watchdog, Golos.

In the days leading up to elections, Golos came under attack from the authorities and state-owned media for its acceptance of grant money from the United States and European Union. Russian authorities have repeatedly denied the group any funding.

Putin compared recipients of foreign money to Judas Iscariot during the Duma campaign. He continued the attack on Thursday, saying other countries were "investing hundreds of millions of dollars" to influence the vote in Russia.

"It's unacceptable when financing is being provided to some domestic organizations that are believed to be national but in fact work for foreign money and perform under the music of a foreign country," he said.

He did not name the countries or the recipients, but he urged the people's front to consider tightening legislation on election-related funding "to protect our sovereignty."

It was unclear how legislation might be tightened. As president, Putin oversaw the passage of tough legislation aimed at preventing foreign funds from influencing elections.

The Presidential Front

Turning to his presidential campaign, which is expected to return Putin to the Kremlin after two presidential terms, between 2000 and 2008, Putin named movie director Stanislav Govorukhin as the head of his campaign team.

Govorukhin, 75, known for his detective miniseries "The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed" (1979), starring bard Vladimir Vysotsky, expressed surprise by his appointment but promised to do his best to support Putin.

Also on the team are pediatrician Leonid Roshal; Alexei Romanov of the Federal Security Service; Nikolai Fyodorov, chairman of the Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Research; labor activist Ivan Mokhnachuk; and several others. Putin said the list might grow.

Centering the team around the All-Russia People's Front will ensure the transparency of his campaign, Putin said.

The All-Russia People's Front, which comprises many major nongovernmental organizations, was created in May to unite nonpartisan supporters of United Russia and give them seats in the new Duma.

Putin said the front would get a total of 25 percent of United Russia's seats, and warned the party against trying to exceed its quota by stealing Duma mandates from peers.

Front representatives used the meeting to complain about regional officials ignoring or sabotaging the group.

Vyacheslav Lysakov, head of the motorist group Svoboda Vybora and a prospective member of Putin's campaign team, suggested that officials who "absolutely ignore professional communities, civil society and nongovernmental organizations" be dismissed. He named head of the transportation department of the Krasnodar region, Dmitry Pugachyov, as a prime candidate for removal.

"I don't even know him, but he's hurting my popularity," Putin said, laughing.

Speaking during a trip to Prague on Thursday, President Dmitry Medvedev echoed Putin, saying protests should not be obstructed as long as they are lawful.

Violations at rallies cause "various incidents" and are "not cool," Medvedev said, Interfax reported.

The president, who Putin promised to swap jobs with if United Russia fared well in the Duma vote, also said the election results reflect the political sentiments of the populace.

"The main thing is ... to let the new parliament work," Medvedev said.

But he also called for fraud reports to be thoroughly investigated.

Clinton, who had expressed concern about reports of election fraud for two days running, toned down her criticism at a NATO meeting in Brussels on Thursday. When asked about calls to annul the Duma vote results and hold new elections, she said: "Those kinds of decisions will have to be left up to the citizens of Russia."

But she also recalled a report by OSCE observers over violations, saying: "We hope that there will be decisions made that reflect the significance of having free, fair and credible elections."

No Place to Rally

Meanwhile, city authorities on Thursday failed to pick a place for Saturday's rally, which is timed for the Central Elections Commission announcement of the final results of the vote.

City Hall earlier sanctioned the Solidarity group to hold a rally of 300 people on Ploshchad Revolyutsii next to Red Square. But Thursday, it proposed to move the event to Bolotnaya Ploshchad, across the river from the Kremlin, saying the original venue would not be able to host a rally of thousands of people.

In addition, "the world's first ice theater," complete with a 4-meter-high palace based on Russian folktales, will open on Ploshchad Revolyutsii on Sunday, the press service of Moscow's Central Administrative District said, RIA-Novosti reported. Forecasts predicted temperatures slightly below freezing Sunday.

Solidarity said it would agree to the new venue if the attendance limit was increased to 10,000 people, Interfax reported. It also named the bigger Manezh Square as an alternative site.

Talks between the Moscow government and Solidarity were to resume Friday. Seven City Hall departments contacted by The Moscow Times failed to provide immediate comment on the matter, while repeated calls to Solidarity went unanswered.

Last Monday's rally near the Chistiye Prudy metro was also allotted for 300 participants but gathered 5,000 to 15,000. Police did not intervene until some protesters tried to stage an unsanctioned march to the next metro station, detaining some 300.

Police said about 570 people were detained at an unsanctioned opposition rally on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad on Tuesday, which saw 1,000 to 2,500 people turn up. About the same number of pro-Kremlin youth activists also rallied in the same place.

Numerous media and witness accounts said police acted with deliberate brutality on Triumfalnaya Ploshchad, beating up detainees in vans before placing them in detention.

No mass crackdown on pro-Kremlin activists was reported, and it remained unclear whether their own rally had been sanctioned.

Some pro-Putin Nashi activists brought to the capital on Sunday to rally in the streets in support of the government actually switched sides and joined the opposition ranks on Monday and Tuesday, Moskovsky Komsomolets [reported](#).

Police also reported detaining about 20 people on Triumfnaya Ploshchad on Wednesday.

The total number of this week's detainees stood at 1,000, independent rights group Agora said Thursday, citing its own figures, Interfax reported. It remained unclear how many were still behind bars.

Many detainees have spent hours and even days in overcrowded police cells without being provided food or water, it said.

Agora asked Moscow prosecutors to look into the mistreatment of the detainees, saying detention centers were in breach of international conventions on prisoner rights. Police have blamed the delays on the unexpectedly high number of detainees.

Tensions continued to mount Thursday, when offices of several leading critics of the elections were attacked by automated messages praising Putin.

Golos, the Yabloko party and the liberal Novaya Gazeta newspaper reported having their telephones blocked by repeated automated calls. The pre-recorded phrases, delivered by echoing female voices, included "Putin is the light," "Putin loves you," and "Love Putin, and your life will be full of meaning," news reports said.

Police had no comment on the matter.

Gauss vs. Churov

Reports of violations continued to flood in, with several bloggers criticizing the election results from a mathematical standpoint, noting that the distribution of votes for United Russia did not confirm to the normal, or Gaussian, statistical distribution.

"Canceling Gaussian distribution is like ordering a right angle to equal 100 degrees and water to boil at 60 degrees [Celsius]," prominent blogger Leonid Kaganov [wrote](#) Wednesday.

A recount was actually ordered in the Volgograd region, where United Russia won an unimpressive 35 percent of the vote, Kommersant [said](#). The recount boosted the ruling party's result by 7 percent, but after a flurry of criticism from the opposition, election officials called the new figure a mistake.

Nevertheless, Central Elections Commission head Vladimir Churov persisted in his claims that vote-rigging reports were fabrications. He said Thursday that he would file complaints with the Investigative Committee to find and punish people responsible for making false videos of ballot-stuffing.

However, he also admitted that no fake videos had been found and conceded that at least some reports were real and needed to be investigated, Interfax reported.

Churov's comments were echoed by United Russia member Vladimir Burmatov, who [said](#) on the party's web site that some videos of alleged fabrications appeared on YouTube before election day. No links for the videos were provided.

At least one instance of incorrect reporting was, indeed, spotted Thursday, when U.S.-based Fox News television [illustrated](#) a story about protests in Moscow with footage from street riots in Greece. The channel did not comment on the mishap.

Several governors from regions where United Russia underperformed, including Yaroslavl, Vologda, Murmansk and Arkhangelsk, have been called to the Kremlin for a scolding, Izvestia [said](#). The mayors of Ulyanovsk and Akhtubinsk — two cities where the ruling party also fared poorly — have already stepped down, allegedly over United Russia's result.

But no mass sackings are likely because new appointees would not have time to improve the situation in time for the presidential vote in March, Izvestia said.

Still, an increasing number of analysts and observers speculated that the Kremlin is faced with the need to at least partially dismantle its "power vertical."

The call was voiced this week by Kremlin first deputy chief of staff [Vladislav Surkov](#), considered the engineer of the "power vertical" and the behind-the-scenes master of United Russia.

"It's obvious for me that the elections have ended the 'managed democracy,' the pseudo-democratic regime," said Gennady Burbulis, the Kremlin's gray cardinal from the early 1990s.

"The authorities are not strong when they mobilize police and Interior Troops. They are strong when they show a capability for dialogue," Burbulis, who served as first deputy prime minister under President [Boris Yeltsin](#), said at a meeting with journalists Thursday.

"I think there's no other task for Vladimir Putin after the March 4 [presidential election] than to implement modernization policies — which, unlike the oppression of dissent, is the only real foundation for stability," Burbulis said.

In the meantime, numerous instructions on how to behave when detained by police began circulating on blogs and social networks, whose users remain the driving force of the protests.