

US officials threaten Russia amid post-election protests

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Amid deep popular disaffection and opposition protests against the regime of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin following Russia's December 4 parliamentary elections, US officials are mounting a campaign to destabilize Russia.

The elections, which were marked by numerous instances of vote fraud, saw Putin's United Russia party officially receive only 49.5 percent of the vote, down 15 percent from 2007. This reflects broad and deeply-felt anger over the disastrous social conditions of post-Soviet Russia. In response, Washington has ratcheted up military and political tensions with the Kremlin, including by backing ongoing protests politically dominated by Russia's official right-wing "opposition" parties.

These protests have been targeted for brutal repression and mass arrests by Russian security forces. Some 1,000 protesters have been arrested over the past week, and there are calls for a demonstration Saturday which roughly 20,000 people are expected to attend, based on current appeals launched on Facebook.

At a NATO meeting in Brussels yesterday, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that Washington would continue installing a missile shield in Eastern Europe that is opposed by Russia. She said the missile shield did not "affect our strategic balance with Russia." However, the US has refused Russian requests for a "binding treaty" guaranteeing the US missile shield will not be deployed against Russian forces.

Clinton also defended her remarks on Monday, given at the election-monitoring Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), when she said: "Russian voters deserve a full investigation of electoral fraud and manipulation. ... Regardless of where you live, citizenship requires holding your government accountable."

Vladimir Putin publicly criticized these remarks yesterday as "interference" by the US government in alliance with political forces inside Russia: "She set the tone for some actors in our country and gave them a signal. They heard the signal, and with the help of the US State Department, began active work." He warned of "chaos," comparing the

situation to past "color revolutions" in Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine, where Washington tried to install more pro-US regimes amid protests organized by US-backed forces.

Yesterday Clinton replied: "The United States and many others around the world have a strong commitment to democracy and human rights. It's part of who we are. It's our values. And we expressed concerns that we thought were well founded about the conduct of the elections."

US Senator John McCain compared events in Russia to the mass protests in the Middle East. On Twitter, he addressed a note to Putin: "Dear Vlad, the Arab Spring is coming to a neighborhood near you."

In fact, Washington, the Russian government, and the "opposition" parties—like the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) and the free-market Yabloko party—are all deeply concerned at rising popular discontent. US officials are seeking to exploit the fact that the protests are limited to relatively small layers of the urban middle class and dominated by the official "opposition" to push Russian politics in a right-wing direction favorable to US imperialism.

The collapse in support for United Russia, founded in 2003 shortly after Putin first came to power, reflects deepening anger at the corrupt billionaire oligarchs and security officials who emerged from the Stalinist bureaucracy after the collapse of the USSR.

The slogan popularized by blogger Alexei Navalny, that United Russia is the "party of crooks and thieves," appeals to the widespread sentiment that the ruling elite is bent on self-enrichment at the expense of the population. This reflects not only the deep social inequality created by the looting of state assets after the fall of the USSR, but also the continuing policies of the Putin regime itself.

Facing rising budget deficits, expected to reach 1.8 percent of GDP in 2012, the Kremlin planned to cut social spending by increasing the retirement age—which currently stands at 60 for men and 55 for women. With Russia's declining life expectancy at 62, this would mean that many men would not live long enough to collect a pension. Putin was compelled

last month to back away from these plans, but his economic development minister, Elvira Nabiullina, then proposed to increase the income tax rate from 12 to 15 or 20 percent.

As in the mass working class protests that toppled US-backed dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt, the only progressive way forward is the emergence of the working class in a political struggle to topple the Putin regime. This is indeed what the ruling class internationally fears.

After the initial protests Monday, Russia's benchmark Micex stock index fell 4 percent Tuesday, though it subsequently stabilized. *The Moscow News* wrote that the "selloff was an overreaction, fueled in large part by fears of an escalation of unrest in Russia on a similar scale to that which has been sweeping the Arab world for much of this year."

Trying to prevent such a development, the ruling classes appeal to dissatisfied layers of the business community and upper middle class, whose discontent can be satisfied if they are offered a bigger piece of the pie.

These layers were well represented by Gleb Pavlovskiy in his comments to the *Svobodnaya Pressa*: "I believe the model that our country found in the last decade is incredibly strong. ... It has a very solid financial base. This consists not only of oil and gas sales but also of vast financial and political operations on the world market in which virtually all groups of the Russian elite are involved without leaving their posts. The system is very well calibrated. The only problem is that it will brook no rivals within the country. It has to present a united front on the world market and so does not allow other players—the business community or citizens—to become private property owners."

The Russian regime itself is making an appeal to these layers. Speaking to *Ekho Moskvy* Tuesday, top Putin adviser Vladislav Surkov endorsed the creation of a "mass liberal party or, more precisely, a party for the annoyed urban communities." He said Russia's political system had to let in "new players" to survive.

Other elements, representing the interests of foreign capital, are seeking to mobilize these layers to form a coalition with nationalist forces like the CPRF capable of replacing Putin and carrying out more right-wing, pro-Western policies.

In a comment for Qatar-based *Al Jazeera*, American academic Sean Guillory writes: "The real danger for the Kremlin, however, is a union between the New Decembrists [Guillory's term for urban liberal youth] and the nationalists. Such a pact would be a potent political force. But who could do it? That person seems to be emerging in the blogger and anti-corruption crusader Alexei Navalny."

Under these conditions, Clinton's claims that the US is pressing for "democracy and human rights" are false and

absurd. Washington has served as the key backer of bloody pro-US dictatorships threatened by mass working class protests this year in Egypt, Tunisia and Bahrain. In other countries, like Libya and Syria, Washington has used protests as a pretext for carrying out or backing armed intervention against regimes it deems hostile to its strategic interests.

In Russia, US imperialism has long pressed for favorable treatment to business oligarchs, such as Mikhail Khodorkovsky of the former Yukos oil company, who are less closely tied to the state bureaucracy. It has also come to view the Kremlin as a major obstacle to its agenda in the Middle East, including the war in Afghanistan.

Russia is a major backer of the Assad government in Syria, which the Western powers have targeted for regime-change, amid continuing protests and defections by elements of the Syrian army supported by US ally Turkey. The Putin regime has also repeatedly stated its opposition to a US war with Iran.

Russia has also become increasingly critical to US logistical support for its occupation forces in Afghanistan. The Northern Distribution Network (NDN), much of which passes through Russia, is at least for now the only functioning US land route into Afghanistan after Pakistan closed its border crossings in retaliation for the US's November 26 bombing of Pakistani border posts. Last week Russia's NATO envoy threatened to seal off the NDN. (See: "US-Russian tensions mount")

On Wednesday, however, General Nikolai Makarov of the Russian General Staff told Interfax that Russia would in fact increase the shipping capacity of the NDN: "I think the role of the transit, the role of the search for ways to deliver cargo to Afghanistan will be increasing."



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