

Putin dismisses election protests

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On a nationally televised show Thursday, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin spent more than four-and-a-half hours responding to dozens of question from callers. While rejecting accusations of electoral fraud in recently held parliamentary elections and dismissing demands for a new vote, Putin signaled a willingness to appease the liberal opposition and accommodate its right-wing agenda.

The former president turned prime minister is running for a new term as president in elections to be held March 4, 2012.

In the parliamentary contest on December 5, the ruling party, United Russia, suffered a major setback, losing its majority in the Duma, with support falling from 64.3 percent to just 49.3 percent. A major factor in the debacle for the party of Putin and President Dimitry Medvedev was growing working class opposition to its pro-business policies and attacks on social welfare programs, and disillusionment with the social disaster produced by 20 years of capitalist restoration.

On Saturday, December 10, tens of thousands of people gathered across the country to protest against ballot-rigging and other measures implemented by the regime to skew the vote. The demonstrations, the largest in years, were organized by the liberal opposition and dominated by middle- and upper-middle class layers in the major cities. A central demand at the events was for the calling of new elections. While the protests remain relatively contained at the moment, the Russian ruling elite is anxious that they could spread beyond their narrow social confines and inspire a movement of the working class.

The US, which maintains close ties to many of the liberal bourgeois opposition groups, has sought to exploit the election crisis to pressure the regime, with which it has mounting conflicts in relation to the Persian Gulf, North Africa and Central and East Asia. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton quickly called for a probe of the voting after Western poll monitors alleged there had been widespread irregularities.

In Thursday's interview, Putin dismissed the charges of

ballot-rigging, insisting that "the opposition will always claim that the elections are unfair." He rejected demands for a vote recount and new elections.

At the same time, he acknowledged that "the elections doubtlessly reflect the balance of power in this country." Claiming that the loss of votes for United Russia was "normal" after a period of crisis, he maintained that the outcome was still "a good sign" for the ruling party. He said the fact that "young and active people" went out onto the street reflected positively on political life in the country.

However, he went on to make crudely disparaging remarks about the show of opposition last Saturday, saying the white ribbons worn at the rallies resembled "dangling contraceptives." As questions continued to flow in about the parliamentary vote, the exasperated prime minister proclaimed, "I am sick of your elections already."

Putin reiterated the claim that Washington stood behind the protest movement, warning that some Russians were trying to bring about a "color revolution" in the interests of the Western powers. Aggressively attacking Washington, he focused in on Republican Senator John McCain, who had posted a comment on Twitter warning that an "Arab spring" would soon come to Russia.

While insisting that the government would keep further protests contained, Putin signaled a willingness to accommodate the free market liberal opposition. The prime minister announced some limited reforms to "modernize" political life in Russia, including the reintroduction of elections for governors (vetted by the Kremlin)—a long-standing demand of liberals. He also held out the prospect of "liberalizing the electoral law" so that the right-wing party Parnas of pro-Western businessman Boris Nemtsov could be officially registered.

Toward the end of the television program, Putin suggested that the ex-oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovskiy might be released from prison. Khodorkovskiy, who is serving a multi-year sentence for tax evasion, was jailed after working towards setting up a political party in

opposition to the Kremlin.

These concessions are an attempt to appease the better-off sections of the urban upper-middle class, whose primary concerns are lack of political influence and access to the spoils of power. Fearing above all the entrance of the working class into struggle, the Kremlin is considering ways to channel this social layer behind Putin by granting it some minor concessions.

A commentary in the newspaper *Vzglyad*, written by the well-known TV presenter Tina Kandelaki, reflects the outlook of the milieu to whom the Kremlin is speaking. Kandelaki wrote that under Putin “a new class has emerged—the class of successful people.” Pointing out that many journalists, writers and actors had participated in last Saturday’s rally, she stated that this “new class,” of whom she herself is a prominent representative, has become “a new dialogue partner” for the Kremlin.

She continued: “On the one hand, one has to understand that the government will not accept any revolution and that it will be right in this. But at the same time, the people won’t allow their opinion to fall on deaf ears. And they will be right, too. Precisely in this consists the present balance of interests.”

The right-wing character of the path the Kremlin is taking was underscored when Putin praised the work of Alexei Kudrin, the recently dismissed finance minister, indicating that he might be invited to return to the government. Kudrin, a champion of fiscal austerity and a favorite of international finance, announced last week that he was considering forming another opposition party. During the TV show, Putin stressed that Kudrin had “never left my team” and maintained that their disagreements on economic questions were “not of a principled character.”

Kudrin has continually pressed the prime minister to abandon his efforts to cultivate a populist image by minimally increasing social spending, particularly with regards to pensions. In the television interview, Putin signaled that he would listen to Kudrin’s demands. Departing from his previous public statements, Putin indicated that the pension age in Russia might be raised, albeit not in the immediate term.

“All countries now raise the pension age, even Ukraine, where life expectancy is the same as here,” he observed. “We still have a lot to do here,” he continued, adding that although “it is too early to speak about this... all aspects of our life have to be modernized, including both the economic and the social spheres.”

A cut in social spending by increasing the retirement

age would have disastrous consequences for millions of people. According to the Independent Institute for Social Politics, 48 percent of the population depends on the payment of these funds to live, with either themselves or family members receiving a pension. Given that life expectancy for men stands at just 60, an increase of the pension age to just 62 would deprive millions of men of any benefits.

Russia’s free market liberals have continually demanded pension “reform.” In the face of the immense unpopularity of this measure and the upcoming presidential election, however, both Putin and Medvedev have distanced themselves from such proposals. Now Putin is broadly hinting that he is prepared to make concessions to the liberals on this question. This underscores the fact that any negotiated settlement between the Kremlin and the liberals will be directed against the working class.

The reactionary and anti-working class character of the Putin regime was highlighted in Thursday’s interview when the prime minister commented on the collapse of the USSR, which occurred 20 years ago this month. While lamenting the breakup of the Soviet Union from a nationalist standpoint, he insisted that the economic reforms that led to the restoration of capitalism in the region had been “necessary.” The result of the transition to a market economy was a fall in working class living standards never before witnessed in world history except during times of war, alongside the formation of Russia’s super-rich oligarchy.



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