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## Putin's Ceaușescu moment<sup>1</sup>

On 21 December 1989, Romania's neo-Stalinist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu called a mass rally in Bucharest to shore up a brutal regime under pressure from galloping reform in the communist states of Eastern Europe. The unthinkable happened: the crowd herded into the city square to endure yet another tedious address suddenly morphed from cheering to jeering. Television cameras recorded the look of horror and disbelief that spread across Ceaușescu's face, as if he were glimpsing the apocalypse. And, in a personal sense, he was. In those few seconds, the latent brittleness of his tyranny was exposed. Events accelerated and, within a few days, his regime had fallen and he and his wife had been executed.

Vladimir Putin's recent experiences might be less drastic, but he must be aware of the unsettling parallels. Opinion polls have been pointing to growing discontent within the Russian population, particularly among the urban middle classes. Official media – especially television, from which 80 per cent of Russians derive most of their information – betray little of this. But the blogosphere is full of robust discussion about the regime's failings. And with over 50 million Russians now using the internet, cyberspace – of almost negligible political significance when Putin came to power – has become a serious threat to regime stability.

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While Putin's personal approval ratings have fallen markedly in recent months, they remain enviably high. Those of his governing United Russia party, on the other hand, have been declining further and faster, and more or less collapsing in some major urban centres. But Putin seemed brimming with self-confidence until quite recently, staging macho electioneering displays, offering sharp and contemptuous comments on the West's economic travails ('the little hamster' – the European Union – 'has bitten off more than it can chew'), and announcing grandiose plans for a new Eurasian Union to embrace much of the former Soviet empire.

In announcing the job-swap with Medvedev, whereby Putin would resume the presidency while magnanimously passing the prime ministership to his Petersburg protégé, the pair told voters that the two of them had agreed on this manoeuvre several years before to enable Putin to return to the top job. This patrimonial approach to the highest, ostensibly elective, offices in the land showed a self-confidence about the public's compliance bordering on the solipsistic.

Many observers believe that this 'castling' (*rokirovka*) manoeuvre by the pair, and the manner in which it was announced, were important factors in exhausting the patience of the long-suffering Russian public. And there were other surprising lapses in judgement by Putin – for example, when he told members of a group of partly Western interlocutors what a great leader his old friend Silvio Berlusconi had been, describing him as one of the last of the Mohicans of European politics. Coming on 11 November, this was not the most opportune moment for Putin to be referring to his and Berlusconi's high mutual regard.

Pride goeth before a fall. Just 10 days later, Putin had his Ceaușescu moment. At a martial arts contest between a Russian champion in indifferent form and an American opponent, who some said had been carefully chosen to give the Russian a certain victory and the Premier another suitably macho electoral photo opportunity, Putin entered the ring to congratulate the burly Russian on his victory. When he began to speak, booing and jeering broke out in the crowd. Putin managed to complete his remarks and beat an orderly retreat, but the damage had been done. His aura of invincibility had suddenly been pierced, like Ceaușescu's nearly 22 years before. The Kremlin went into damage control, seeking to argue that the crowd had been booing the

American for putting up a poor fight. But few believed it, and many of the fans present went to the trouble of posting their real views on the subject online, including on the American's own website, where they assured him of their utmost respect.

The warning signals were evident earlier in the campaign when attempts by the ruling party to tie United Russia's campaign to the public appearances of popular Russian celebrities had ended in public irritation and heckling. But, for Putin himself to suffer such a public indignity was unprecedented. He was clearly shaken, and though he is typically now a confident public performer, he began avoiding potentially hazardous public appearances in the run-up to the elections for the Duma (parliament) last weekend.

Under Putin, the Kremlin has closely followed and itself commissions public opinion surveys. The regime's nervousness about the elections was palpable. Despite the steeply tilted playing field and the strenuous exercise of what is known euphemistically as 'the administrative resource' (including ballot-stuffing, intimidation and bribery of voters, and requiring key officials, employers, university rectors and so on to reach a required target vote for the ruling party in their bailiwicks), the results appear to have been worse than the regime feared. Putin's brief public appearance to claim victory at party headquarters displayed none of his usual panache.

United Russia had not only lost its two-thirds constitutional majority, it was also struggling to reach a simple majority of votes cast. Exit polling suggested a vote for the party of somewhere between 46 and 48 per cent. Some observers guesstimated that the real figure may have been well below that. In Moscow, St Petersburg and some other big cities, United Russia was running in the low 30s, or lower, according to exit polling, though official results were sometimes massaged upwards.

By various means, Putin has effectively excluded most serious opposition parties from participating in Russian elections or the public media. In their absence, the three tame parties that are tolerated in parliament (the Communist Party, the grotesquely misnamed Liberal Democratic Party of the chauvinist buffoon Vladimir Zhirinovsky, and the left-leaning A Just Russia party, which the regime had been hoping to oust) all did very much better than before. They had campaigned

with more vigour than usual, and benefited from the fact that many 'illegal' oppositionists had called on their followers to vote for any party other than the ruling party.

The Central Electoral Commission, headed by the faithful functionary Vladimir Churov, has indicated that United Russia's vote will be sufficient to give them 238 seats, a narrow absolute majority in the 450-seat Duma. This result probably owed something to outright manipulation in the commission and elsewhere. In the indigenised tyranny that is Chechnya, for example, there was reportedly a truly Soviet turnout of over 99 per cent (compared with 60 per cent nationwide), of whom we are told 99 per cent voted for United Russia. Indeed, the party was heavily dependent on Russia's Caucasian regions, many of which are experiencing an ongoing armed insurgency, to reach its bare majority of seats.

Despite periodic rhetorical flourishes, the tolerated parties haven't represented a major threat to United Russia's dominance of the Duma. Notwithstanding their sharply increased numbers, the situation is probably still manageable for the regime, barring any further increase in turbulence. Nonetheless, the spate of unusually large demonstrations in Moscow and St Petersburg in recent days suggests further troubles may lie ahead in the run-up to presidential elections on 4 March. What was expected to be a shoo-in may prove unpleasantly exciting for the anointed candidate, though in the end it's hard to see him not winning.

In the meantime, Putin will probably work on shoring up support from the other three parties by offering them perks and sinecures, and maybe even some minor and safe portfolios. Despite its recent feud with the regime, A Just Russia has already indicated it would be prepared to cooperate in the new parliament. Zhirinovskiy and his chauvinist mates have been under Kremlin control since their first emergence on the scene in the early years of Boris Yeltsin's reign, and will surely continue to support the government. Even the communists shouldn't find it hard to sign on to more state largesse for various underprivileged groups, a big military buildup and stoking tensions with the West.

Until now Putin has had a dream run. Plucked from a modest eminence in the Petersburg city apparatus to serve in Yeltsin's administration in Moscow in March 1997, he made a giddy ascent. Starting as deputy

chief of staff to Yeltsin, in less than three years he progressed through ever more senior posts to become successively head of the Federal Security Service (FSB – the domestic successor to the KGB), secretary of the Security Council, deputy prime minister, prime minister, acting president and finally the elected president of Russia. Yeltsin had decided that this young man – Putin was not yet 50 – could best guarantee his legacy and his family's vital interests.

That was just the beginning of his good fortune. Despite enjoying only modest public recognition, he quickly converted his standing as president into genuine popularity. This was based, above all, on three factors: unlike his predecessor he was young, healthy, sober and intelligently articulate; he had relaunched the war against the armed Chechen rebels and done so with apparent success; and, most importantly, the price of oil and gas had soared following a lengthy slump under Yeltsin. After the hardships of Russia's feel-as-you-go transition from a command economy with a huge ballast of imperial defence expenditure to a market economy via a corrupt privatisation process, GDP stabilised from its steep decline in the 1990s and then took off through the early to mid-noughties.

Putin reaped the political benefits of this turnaround. As he set about rolling back the political freedoms of the Yeltsin era, the Russian public seemed to be happy to accept a bit of traditional Russian autocracy as long as their pay kept increasing and arriving on time. Nor were they averse to the strongly anti-Western edge to Putin's foreign policy. Like him, they had been reared to hate the West, and the tribulations of market democracy had inoculated them against the pro-Western euphoria that had briefly swept over the Russian political elite and the population at large in the Gorbachev and early Yeltsin years.

Then came the global financial crisis. At first, Putin seemed convinced that this downturn for his Western adversaries must be good for Russia, which, he confidently expected, would sail through the turbulence with all flags flying. But in 2009 the Russian economy shrank by 8 per cent. The painful downturn must have dented Putin's reputation as an economic manager. While his stellar approval ratings stood up pretty well at first, they later began to decline, and surprisingly continued to do so even as the economy partly recovered. That trend

has accelerated in 2011. While overall economic performance has been solid, opinion polling this year has consistently pointed to progressive erosion of Putin's, Medvedev's and the ruling party's standing.

What we can expect next from a chastened Putin is probably a little bit of carrot and rather more knout. On the carrot side, there have already been big concessions on salaries and social security expenditures, but we may now see more such budgetary largesse. With former finance minister and close Putin ally from the Petersburg years Aleksei Kudrin disciplined for having questioned the proposed ballooning of military expenses, there will be less effective resistance to any such dubious fiscal measures. Thanks to Kudrin's legacy, Putin has a better starting point from which to commit fiscal vandalism than most European leaders.

The big buildup in military expenditure is a carrot that will please the military and nationalist lobbies, both of which are large and powerful. Unlike the security organs, the military have not had an easy time of it under Putin, who has sanctioned a long-running effort to move the military establishment from its traditional reliance on a large conscript army towards something smaller and more high-tech. Expenditure on personnel has been pared back to make funds available for more sophisticated weaponry; the oversized officer corps has been thinned out. All of this has been painful for the military and resisted by many senior officers. Compensatory salary hikes for the military were already on the table.

But Putin may decide to conciliate it further with a change of leadership in the defence portfolio, as well as intensified anti-Western themes in his foreign and security policies. A winding back of the 'reset' with the United States, further shrill criticism of NATO, support for Iran, Syria's Bashar al-Assad, Kosovo Serbs and so on, and more anger and indignation about the proposed missile defence installations in Eastern Europe could all be on the agenda. There have been rumours in the Russian press that the intensely abrasive Russian ambassador to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, who has been in Moscow recently for discussions on military matters, could be appointed defence minister.

Articulate and combative in several European languages, and reportedly the son-in-law of a KGB general, Rogozin's appointment would be a fairly robust signal in itself to Washington and Brussels.

If he stayed in the job, it is likely he would deliver further robust signals at regular intervals. None of this would necessarily diminish his popularity with much of the Russian public, who liked the cut of his jib when he headed an earlier Kremlin-backed party called Rodina (Motherland), which the Kremlin dismantled because its strident nationalism was becoming too electorally competitive.

Still on the carrot side, we can expect some conspicuous and condign punishment for unpopular officials. Medvedev, who is actually still president despite recent appearances, has already called for a reckoning with provincial governors who failed to deliver sufficient votes for the ruling party in their domains. Despite his liberal leanings, Medvedev has a much more off-with-their-heads style with allegedly erring subordinates than Putin, and we can expect to see it in action. Putin prefers to dress down his senior colleagues on prime-time television without necessarily replacing them, and we can expect some of that as well when he recovers his balance. To what extent that will placate the public remains to be tested.

The Kremlin's political manipulator-in-chief, Vladislav Surkov, has been speaking since the elections of the need to create a right-wing opposition party to broaden the Putinist system's bizarrely skewed political spectrum. Surkov was working on such a party some months back, using a once semi-authentic right-wing party called Right Cause as the building block. But the Kremlin-designated leader of the revived party, oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov, threw himself into the project with too much enthusiasm, leading Surkov, doubtless in consultation with Putin, to organise a coup against him.

Prokhorov then resigned with a clatter, publicly denouncing the 'puppet-master', Surkov. None of this conformed to the script and was itself a sign of a new current of unpredictability beneath the glossy surface of Putin's 'managed' or 'sovereign' democracy. Whether Surkov will have any more success with his new project than he had with the earlier one remains to be seen, but similar activity to provide the appearance of more democracy can be expected.

There have been signs that Putin will try to adjust his own image for something more modern and consultative. After 12 or more years in the public eye, though, he has a rather fixed persona. He may find it easier to project a new image through prominent appointees who

have greater reformist credibility. He may, for instance, set up a new body to tackle corruption with a relative cleanskin at the head of it. The Public Chamber, an advisory body attached to the parliament, may be called on to look at pre-trial detention and other such issues. In extremis, he may even order a review of Mikhail Khodorkovsky's case, despite his consuming hatred for the imprisoned businessman. But public scepticism won't easily be overcome.

Putin and his inner circle will also place a very high priority on bringing an unruly public back into line. The Moscow and Petersburg demonstrations against the election results have made visible a massive police presence in the two capitals and led to over 1,000 arrests. Among those arrested and sentenced to 15 days' detention was the extremely popular anti-corruption campaigner, Aleksey Navalny. A lawyer by trade and a highly skilled blogger by avocation, Navalny's website and other cyber pronouncements have built his following. In particular, his coining of the now universally quoted phrase 'the party of crooks and thieves' did more to bring about the downturn in United Russia's fortunes than almost any other single factor.

Navalny has launched an increasingly forceful challenge to Putin in the blogosphere, and Putin has probably decided he needs to meet it head on. People like Navalny have sometimes been killed or maimed in the past by 'unknown assailants'. But he is something of a nationalist, which together with his fame and popularity makes him harder to deal with than most traditional opposition figures. Before Alexandr Solzhenitsyn was driven into exile in 1974, he told a Western interviewer that, despite death threats he felt safe: not a hair would fall from his head or the heads of any of his family without the consent of the KGB, he said, because they knew they would be blamed for it. On that logic, the Kremlin may wish to avoid making a martyr of Navalny, but they will increase their pressure on him.

More generally, harassment and punishment for obdurate opposition figures is likely to increase, quite possibly in parallel with calls for a new spirit of dialogue and discussion in the public sphere. Putin controls the security organs and has made their senior workforce, the *siloviki* (securocrats), central to the functioning of the state, the economy and society. He is unlikely to come under pressure from that quarter. Insofar as the organs have – as they surely must – heightened professional concerns about stability, which is one of Putin's most

cherished political values (and one he reaffirmed in his very brief victory remarks on election night), he can easily make gestures in their direction, and indeed may now be eager to do so.

In July this year, the FSB called for the introduction of restrictions on the internet to counteract 'terrorism'. Medvedev – who has made a thing of advancing computerisation of Russian society, is personally cyber-adept, and uses social media to broadcast his views and policies – quickly let it be known that he opposed this initiative. Putin who by contrast is cyber-challenged, offered no immediate public reaction, but in early September was reported as declaring publicly that in 'modern states' internet access should not be restricted.

That affirmation should not be taken too seriously. Hacking and denial-of-service attacks in or from Russia, which have looked very likely to be officially inspired, have been occurring for years. During the acrimonious dispute between Russia and Estonia in 2007, the tiny Baltic nation's highly sophisticated and extensive national internet systems were the subject of coordinated attacks sourced from Russia, which were widely believed to have been sanctioned by the Kremlin.

There have been intermittent attacks against websites in Russia in recent years, though never massive or sustained. But before, during and after last weekend's parliamentary elections, hackers temporarily crippled a large number of oppositionist websites, and even legally sanctioned media outlets that were deemed too independent. In particular, attacks were launched against an NGO called GOLOS ('voice' or 'vote' in Russian), which, like Navalny, had particularly infuriated the Kremlin in the months leading up to the elections. GOLOS maintains an interactive site known as Karta Narushenii (Map of Violations), on which were recorded all reports they have received of 'the administrative resource' being deployed to skew the elections in United Russia's favour.

Putin has expressed particular hostility towards GOLOS because he has been trying to limit or even squeeze out independent international election monitors, and GOLOS, though a Russian volunteer monitoring organisation, has received funding from Western sources. He has referred recently to GOLOS volunteers as 'Judases', and further action against them seems likely. Putin's regime has long been deeply anxious about the possibility of a coloured revolution, like those that took

place in Georgia and Ukraine. Until now any such popular uprising in Russia has seemed highly unlikely, and probably for the time being remains so. But where there is fear within a regime like this one, oppressive measures may not be far away.

In present circumstances, the Kremlin may decide that its hacking resources are not a sufficient defence against the burgeoning menace from the blogosphere. If so, they may look again at the successful measures their strategic partner China has applied to filter and control the internet. Any such policy initiative by their former boss would of course be warmly welcomed and enthusiastically applied by the FSB, who have been pressing for just such a crackdown.

While he feels some distaste for the provincial enthusiasms of the Belarus dictator Alexander Lukashenka, Putin may even look more closely at how Lukashenka has succeeded in crushing major unrest in his country, despite an unfolding economic disaster that has reduced Belarusians' real incomes by more than half. Any president who can keep that kind of situation in check must be well worth bailing out – which is precisely what Putin has recently done for Lukashenka.

In considering his next steps, Putin needs to decide what to do with Medvedev. When they swapped jobs, the younger man was also given the task of heading the United Russia election campaign, a curious assignment, constitutionally speaking, for a president and, moreover, one who wasn't even a member of the party. It seemed at the time that Putin was thereby flicking his tandem partner a hospital pass. United Russia's ratings were known to be floundering. Now that Medvedev has predictably failed to revive them, he could be punished for having sought for a few months in early 2011 to assert himself against the paramount leader. Putin might even have been thinking of reneging on his promise to appoint Medvedev as prime minister when he resumes the presidency.

If so, he may now be reconsidering. His own position has been weakened, and any attempt to scapegoat Medvedev might lead to more trouble. In a sense, the events of the last few days in Petersburg and Moscow are fuelled by a loss of illusions among those who had dared to hope for improvements during a second Medvedev term. Better perhaps to appoint him as prime minister, allow him to resume enunciating his more liberal opinions and, perhaps, even to make

a few liberal ministerial appointments and actually to do a few things. The problem with trying to deploy Medvedev as a carrot is that Medvedev, in meekly agreeing to vacate the presidency for Putin without visible resistance, has lost most of the credibility he had gained by his liberal pronouncements, perhaps irretrievably. Either way, what happens to Medvedev should be a sign of things to come.

Despite the recent turbulence, in the short to medium term any further major increase in levels of unrest seems unlikely. So, net emigration outflows, disproportionately of the best and brightest, look set to continue, though that will not be as a matter of deliberate policy choice aimed at ensuring 'stability'. The presidential elections on 4 March will be a worrying time for the regime, but candidate Putin has not allowed serious rivals to present themselves, and any who were to emerge at this late stage would be expediently dealt with. But if he manages to restore calm by whatever combination of knout and carrot, and thereafter chooses not to make any serious concessions to growing opposition sentiment, tensions could rapidly surge again.

Since the Bolshevik revolution, Moscow has most typically dealt with unrest or opposition by severe repression and emigration. In the last decade, 1.25 million people have left Russia, many of them young and highly qualified. Opinion polls suggest that some 20 per cent of Russians would currently like to emigrate despite the economic improvements of the Putin era. Putin worries about Russia's grim demographic situation, and is unlikely to welcome a major outflow. But he also wants a deal on mutual visa-free travel with the European Union, and reintroduction of Soviet-style border controls seems unlikely.

In the longer run, that leaves comprehensive democratic reform or repression as the central policy dilemma for Putin 2.0. Putin's instincts are undoubtedly hardline; and they will have been reinforced by his recent humiliations. Up until now his autocracy has been based more on manipulation and delivery of tangible benefits than brute force. But his violent crackdown in Chechnya and surrounding regions, and the stark language he has often used in public about domestic adversaries suggest that, in the interests of domestic stability and Russia's return to great power status, if thwarted and defied, he may see harsher measures as necessary. If he does, the Arab Spring scenarios that some domestic critics have foreseen may indeed start to come into view.

After a decade of Putin's increasingly predictable restorationism, Russia has entered another period of flux and uncertainty. If the hamster's struggles with the euro crisis prove unsuccessful, we may see another sharp economic downturn in the West. Putin's impulse will first be to rejoice. But another 2009 will be the last thing he needs.

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