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## Re-enter Putin, weakened and resentful<sup>1</sup>

While he presented himself throughout his campaign as the ‘stability’ candidate who could not only snorkel down to priceless ancient artefacts, but also save the country from the disintegration plotted by sinister Western agencies, Vladimir Putin’s return has in reality added an extra layer of instability to a situation already piled high with new uncertainties. Until recently, his popularity was sinking in the opinion polls, not as rapidly as that of his ruling United Russia party, but steeply nonetheless.

His win in the presidential elections on 4 March is being rejected as illegitimate by the opposition. So the attacks on him in the cybersphere can be expected to become even denser and more sardonic in his third term in the presidency, as internet use in Russia climbs further – having already overtaken Germany in absolute numbers in September 2011.<sup>2</sup> This is a key reason why many pundits, even within the Russian establishment, are starting to hint at the likelihood of his not seeing out his new six-year term in the top job.

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1 First published in three parts in *The Interpreter*, 8–9 Mar. 2012, [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/03/08/Putins-Pyrrhic-victory.aspx](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/03/08/Putins-Pyrrhic-victory.aspx); [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/03/09/Re-enter-Putin-weakened-and-resentful.aspx](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/03/09/Re-enter-Putin-weakened-and-resentful.aspx); [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/03/09/Putin-For-Russians-the-thrill-is-gone.aspx](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/03/09/Putin-For-Russians-the-thrill-is-gone.aspx).

2 See ‘ComScore releases overview of European internet usage in September 2011’, 14 Nov. 2011, [www.comscore.com/Insights/Press-Releases/2011/11/comScore-Releases-Overview-of-European-Internet-Usage-in-September-2011](http://www.comscore.com/Insights/Press-Releases/2011/11/comScore-Releases-Overview-of-European-Internet-Usage-in-September-2011).

His 64 per cent first-round victory looks convincing enough on paper, but it must be remembered that this was a contest against a carefully restricted line-up of compliant losers and Kremlin projects. Genuine opponents were kept out of the race by various expedients. None of the leaders of the new opposition even bothered to seek approval to stand, knowing it would be refused by Putin's loyal allies in the Central Electoral Commission. State television, from which the majority of Russians continue to derive their news and views of the world, has been heavily, often fawningly, skewed in Putin's favour for over a decade.

And, while the installation of nearly half a billion dollars' worth of webcams in the 90,000 polling stations across the country and the deployment of a large number of new opposition recruits as election observers made vote-rigging harder (*New York Times*, 5 Mar. 2012), the regime apparently rose to the occasion. Teams of 'Vote early and vote often' supporters, equipped with large supplies of absentee voting forms, were bussed around from polling station to polling station to build up the numbers ('carousel voting' in current Russian jargon). Many instances of electoral fraud were reported<sup>3</sup> and the official Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observer group criticised the conduct of the elections.

Nonetheless, even GOLOS, the leading independent election monitors (helpfully ejected from their headquarters a few weeks before the poll) acknowledged that Putin probably scored just over 50 per cent of the vote. So a win is a win is a win. Or is it?

In budgetary terms, this has been a Pyrrhic victory for the regime. Even before the election campaign, Putin had secured a budget full of goodies for almost all sectors of the electorate: big pay rises for doctors, academics, teachers, security organs, armed forces, and enhanced payments for pensioners, mothers (especially the more fecund), and students. He also arranged for unpopular but necessary price hikes for basic utilities to be postponed till later this year. Then he added further to the burden by extravagant promises during the campaign.<sup>4</sup>

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3 See Tom Balmforth, 'Election observers claim fraud, intimidation in Russian vote', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 4 Mar. 2012, [rferl.org/articleprintview/24504685.html](http://rferl.org/articleprintview/24504685.html).

4 Jason Bush, 'Price of victory may be too high for Putin', *Reuters*, 5 Mar. 2012, [www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/05/us-russia-election-promises-idUSTRE8240EQ20120305](http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/05/us-russia-election-promises-idUSTRE8240EQ20120305).

Putin will be able to appoint a prime minister to take the blame for this profligacy. On the eve of the election he reaffirmed his earlier promise that Medvedev is to be his nominee for the position, and Medvedev is certainly abundantly well qualified for this subordinate role. Apart from that, Russia's current fiscal position is sound by European standards thanks to high prices for its energy exports and the legacy of tough fiscal orthodoxy left by Putin's longtime ally the former finance minister and now semi-dissident Aleksei Kudrin. But, particularly if European economies slump further and/or there is a dip in the price of oil and gas, Putin is going to have to severely disappoint some of his core electorate.

This could lead to a renewed decline in his popularity ratings. Putin has run into the dilemma familiar in more genuine democracies of being the politician that people have become sick of, and have largely stopped listening to. His grossly inflated campaign rhetoric about sinister Western enemies, the break-up of the Russian Federation, attempts by the mild-mannered, middle-class protesters to stage a coup, and so on, may have helped him to energise some of his own supporters but probably alienated many others. To maintain the support of the faithful, he needs to deliver on his promises and, to recapture some of the lost sheep, he needs to somehow reconcile the urban intelligentsia.

But it is hard to see how he can do the former and how he would ever want to do the latter. A key part of his campaign was to contrast the limp-wristed arty-farties of Moscow and St Petersburg with the salt-of-the-earth working classes of the provinces. In a late-night video link-up with workers in a remote armaments factory, he told them: 'You showed who the Russian people are, the Russian working man ... You showed you are a head higher than any layabout, any old windbag.'<sup>5</sup>

In fact, Putin has been roundly insulting the urban middle class since the protests broke out after the parliamentary (Duma) elections on 4 December last year. Then he compared their white ribbons with condoms in an anti-AIDS advertisement, and asserted that they were only out on the streets because the US State Department had bribed

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5 See 'Emotional Putin wins election as opposition cries foul', *EurActiv*, 5 Mar. 2012, [www.euractiv.com/europes-east/emotional-putin-win-election-opposition-cries-foul-news-511273](http://www.euractiv.com/europes-east/emotional-putin-win-election-opposition-cries-foul-news-511273).

them to be there (another apparent case of Freudian projection, like the plot to murder one of their own attributed to the opposition). He has maintained a similar tone ever since.

Putin has for some years lived in intermittent terror of a 'colour revolution' in Russia, unlikely as that prospect has always seemed to most outside observers. He sees the Rose Revolution in Georgia in November 2003 and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004–05 as the prototypes of externally devised and imposed conspiracies that have little to do with rorted elections or popular dissatisfaction within those countries, but everything to do with the almost unlimited capacity of foreign intelligence services to impose their will. He sees these developments as of a kind with the much more palpable involvement of external agencies in the overturning of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, and other Arab Spring phenomena. Not normally a man with a gift for human empathy, Putin seems to strongly identify with Colonel Gaddafi and President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, whose fate he has referred to more than once.

Putin returns to the presidency angry with his domestic adversaries and their supposed foreign backers, and seemingly bent more on repression than on reconciliation. Already before the election there were attacks on a number of the most prominent of the tolerated independent media voices, either through criminal investigations or pressure on their owners. In a characteristic outburst, Putin publicly denounced one such editor for 'pouring shit over me from morning till evening'.<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly, the owners of that media outlet took the hint and went into action a short time later to reshuffle the station's board of directors.<sup>7</sup> More such measures seem highly likely.

The big question is whether he will take on the internet purveyors of excrement. Putin is not internet-savvy, but he is probably thinking something along the lines of the wit who said, on being reproached for overstepping the boundaries of his competence: 'I can't lay an egg, but I certainly know when I get a bad one.' While he has more than once claimed to believe that Russia's internet should remain free, it has

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6 Benjamin Bidder, 'Controlling the press', *Spiegel Online*, 17 Feb. 2012, [www.spiegel.de/international/world/controlling-the-press-echo-of-moscow-under-pressure-in-russia-a-815731.html](http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/controlling-the-press-echo-of-moscow-under-pressure-in-russia-a-815731.html).

7 'Ekho Moskvyy editor says reshuffle aimed at "controlling" election coverage', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 14 Feb. 2012, [www.rferl.org/content/gazprom\\_wants\\_to\\_dismiss\\_radio\\_board/24483318.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/gazprom_wants_to_dismiss_radio_board/24483318.html).

not been entirely free to date. Cyber-attacks from mysterious sources commonly linked to Kremlin-backed youth movements like Nashi (sometimes referred to derisively as Putinjugend) have often been deployed both on foreign and domestic enemies.

But Putin may well feel now that strong measures must be undertaken against the bloggers. In addition to that, he can be expected to rein in some of the glasnost that has been spreading in the more orthodox media outlets.

Putin's fears of a ruthless colour revolution notwithstanding, Russia's oppositionists are basically civilised, and not too formidable. Though impressed by the example of the Arab Spring, they are not desperate members of a huge youth unemployment bubble moved by a transcendental ideology that offers them the certain hope of eternal joy in the hereafter and a release for their burning resentments now. The Russian opposition wants dignity and respect, a chance to have a say about how they are governed and, more generally, greater opportunities to realise their professional talents.

If they are denied these, they can always head for the exits, as many of their like-minded fellow countrymen have been already doing. According to Sergey Stepashin, a senior Russian official and one-time prime minister, over 1.25 million Russians have emigrated in recent years, including many young, highly qualified professionals. Twenty per cent of respondents told the independent Levada opinion polling agency that they would like to emigrate.<sup>8</sup> If obstreperous oppositionists chose not to do so voluntarily, it might prove necessary for them to be selectively encouraged to do so.

Putin should, however, beware of believing his rhetoric that it's only the urban middle classes with whom he has a problem, and that ordinary Russians remain as supportive of him as ever. One forms the impression that for many of them, too, the thrill has gone and that they see him more as inevitable than as necessarily desirable. At this stage his popularity is probably several time zones wide, but only an inch or two deep.

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<sup>8</sup> Sergei Loiko, 'Russians are leaving the country in droves', *Los Angeles Times*, 14 Nov. 2011, [articles.latimes.com/2011/nov/14/world/la-fg-russia-emigration-20111115](http://articles.latimes.com/2011/nov/14/world/la-fg-russia-emigration-20111115).

People of all milieus are angry at being taken for granted and infuriated by the ubiquitous corruption, both petty and spectacular, blighting Russian life, for which they blame 'the party of crooks and thieves'.<sup>9</sup>

Putin has a serious problem on his hands. But some Western commentators may be getting ahead of themselves in describing him as an already spent force, presiding over a dysfunctional and ineffective 'power vertical'.<sup>10</sup> The 'end of Putinism', proclaimed an article in the *Washington Post* on 5 March. 'Russia's incredible shrinking Prime Minister', read *Time* magazine's front cover for 24 February 2012, with apt graphic reinforcement. But, at a time when many countries in its region are doing rather worse, the Russian economy will get by with sensible management for some time yet, even without the serious reforms that many recommend.<sup>11</sup> And, while the coercive structures of the state may conceal some structural weaknesses, the opposition would be unwise to test their mettle too much.

Whilst maintaining his own hardline stances, Putin may also continue his longstanding arrangement of having the unthreateningly reformist Medvedev issue forth liberal pronouncements and initiatives from time to time to keep the opposition's hopes up and make favourable headlines in the Western media. If under real stress, he might move Medvedev to another post and bring back the strong-willed Kudrin as prime minister, while making clear to him that his primary task was to maintain economic stability, not propose early elections or other dangerous liberal ideas.

Putin may be looking more mortal than the swaggering figure of the noughties with his astronomical approval ratings. But he has his 64 per cent, however acquired, and this may dispirit the opposition in the months ahead, whilst discouraging potential opponents within the so-called political elite from contemplating a palace coup. His brand is tarnished and he seems to have no plausible platform for tackling many of Russia's real problems. But the obituaries are premature.

9 See 'Russia election: Hundreds rally against Putin in Moscow', BBC News, 5 Dec. 2011, [www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-16042797](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-16042797).

10 See Stephen Hoffman, 'The power vertical and its chilling effect on democracy', *Human Rights in Russia*, 5 Mar. 2012, [www.rightsinrussia.info/archive/blog/hoffman/power-vertical](http://www.rightsinrussia.info/archive/blog/hoffman/power-vertical).

11 See, for example, the article by the eminent British economist Philip Hanson in the Chatham House report 'Putin again: Implications for Russia and the West', Feb. 2012, [www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/r0212\\_putin.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/r0212_putin.pdf).

This text is taken from *A Difficult Neighbourhood: Essays on Russia and East-Central Europe since World War II*, by John Besemeres, published 2016 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.