

19

Towards a greater Putistan? Part 1¹

The months between early December last year and late October this year may come to be seen as a time when the Slavonic core of the former Soviet Union took a further, and perhaps decisive, turn away from European democracy. In December 2011 and March 2012, Russia held parliamentary and presidential elections that seem, after a season of excitement, to have confirmed Vladimir Putin's grip on power for at least another six years and initiated a trend towards a police state. Parliamentary elections are scheduled in Belarus for 23 September and in Ukraine for 28 October, and although Belarus's are a formality, Ukraine's are much less so. Both, however, are likely to confirm autocratic continuity with distinct downside risks.

Outside the Baltics and one or two other former Soviet republics, elections in the successor states of the Soviet Union don't normally count for a great deal. The results are usually predictable, and the events themselves elaborately stage-managed. Nonetheless, they can at times cause a boilover of sorts, as occurred in December 2011 when Russia's parliamentaries, despite all the rigging on a sloping deck, saw a shockingly bad result for Putin's ruling United Russia party, which lost 77 of its parliamentary seats. While United Russia failed to get an absolute majority of votes, it did manage still to win a slim absolute

1 First published as 'Towards a greater Putistan?' in *Inside Story*, 17 Sep. 2012, insidestory.org.au/towards-a-greater-putistan.

majority of seats over the largely docile opposition parties that are permitted representation in the legislature. It has used that majority to pass a series of repressive laws aimed at neutralising the opposition and minimising their activities on the street and the internet.

At 64 per cent, Putin's winning vote in the presidential poll in March 2012 was more convincing. Despite the considerable unrest, mainly affecting the urban middle classes, this comfortable margin was not surprising given his near complete control of television (where most Russians get their information) and of who might be allowed to run against him. Observers saw evidence of extensive fraud on the day, but nearly all felt that, regardless, Putin would have scraped over the line in that first round.

Belarus's last elections – the presidential contest in December 2010 – produced a similar surprise to the recent Russian electoral cycle – a phoney outcome leading to an outburst of popular anger, then a crackdown. The preordained winner, Alexander Lukashenka, was duly declared to have secured a fourth straight victory with a totally implausible 80 per cent of the vote. Nine candidates had been permitted to run against him and were given slightly less restrictive conditions than usual in an effort to mollify the European Union as a hedge against Moscow.

A few days before the poll, Moscow ironed out its bilateral dispute with Minsk by renewing subsidies for Belarus's energy sector worth, according to Putin, over US\$4 billion per annum. Seeing no further need to hold out an olive branch to the European Union, Lukashenka unleashed a ferocious crackdown on the peaceful crowd that had gathered to protest the results on election night. Many were manhandled, 639 were arrested, including several of his fellow presidential candidates, and dozens of people were ultimately sentenced to lengthy jail terms. Conditions for political prisoners in Lukashenka's jails are particularly harsh: they are often, for example, put together with murderers and other difficult inmates.

Despite the regime's brutality, opposition on the streets continued for many months afterwards. In response, Lukashenka progressively sharpened his legislative provisions to the point where people could

be arrested for applauding in a public place, or even for being silent in a public place. The regime has essentially maintained the crackdown ever since.

In 2011 the national economy had fallen into a severe slump, which was largely caused by Lukashenka's reckless pre-election spending. As a consequence, opinion polling showed the president's real support falling to around 30 per cent.

Like Putin, Lukashenka had enjoyed a considerable degree of real popularity in earlier years and, like Putin, he had now been given a clear signal by popular unrest and opinion polling that he would need to take sterner measures to maintain himself in power. With the opposition cowed by the regime's unrelenting repression, and the economy picking up considerably thanks to further increases in Russian subsidies, the parliamentary elections on 23 September will almost certainly result in a win for the regime.

When it comes to repression, Lukashenka is meticulously thorough. In July a group of Swedish activists managed to get a light aircraft into Belarus and drop a few hundred teddy bears holding a freedom of speech message in their paws. Lukashenka was so incensed that he expelled the Swedish ambassador, closed the Swedish embassy, sacked his foreign minister and the head of his airforce, sacked another general for good measure, and had arrested a young man who placed an image of the bears on his own website.

Judged by neighbourhood standards, Ukrainian elections are less predictable and its politics a little more pluralist. Governments and policy directions have changed more than once since the fall of the Soviet Union. In November–December 2004, when Ukraine's current President, Viktor Yanukovich, was implausibly declared the winner of the presidential election despite widespread reports of gross irregularities, public indignation was so great and effective that the result was finally overturned. Yanukovich was defeated in the re-run by Orange Revolution leader Viktor Yushchenko.

The coalition of Yushchenko and firebrand orator Yulia Tymoshenko, who became prime minister, soon fell apart. After a giddy series of political changes and a severe slump in 2009 because of the global financial crisis, popular support for the Orange forces fell away. At the next presidentials in early 2010, Yanukovich made a comeback,

narrowly defeating Tymoshenko in the run-off. The Orange leadership, with its endless internal feuds and failure to implement promised reforms, had been a great disappointment to its supporters at home and abroad. And the disappointment was magnified by the deep economic slump caused by the Global Financial Crisis. But the Orange leaders had at least established and maintained a large degree of democratic freedom and propriety, as Yanukovych's victory itself demonstrated.

On taking power in March 2010, Yanukovych and his Party of Regions quickly converted a narrow victory into a near stranglehold on power by highly dubious means. Democratic freedoms were whittled away and opposition parliamentarians were bribed into joining the government coalition, enabling it to control the parliament. The powers of the presidency have been expanded with the compliance of the judiciary, whose independence has been systematically undermined. Key opposition leaders have been jailed on trumped-up charges to prevent them from presenting any kind of threat at future elections.

Yanukovych, who above all represents the more Russified east and south-east of the country, has taken several big steps towards closer alignment with Moscow. At the same time, he has continued to assert that membership of the European Union is his prime economic objective, and that he will not accede to the various post-Soviet multilateral organisations that Putin is pressing him to join. But the constant abuses of democratic principles have effectively put significant progress towards Europe out of the question, despite the technical negotiations for an association and free-trade agreement having been successfully concluded. The imprisonment of Yulia Tymoshenko, who is now being threatened with a further series of implausible charges, including one for alleged conspiracy to murder, is only the best-known of these abuses.

Despite Yanukovych's consolidation of autocratic control and his free use of administrative resources and legal chicaneries to neutralise the battered Orange forces, it still seems possible that the elections on 28 October could produce another changeover in parliament. Opinion polls show the Party of Regions and the united opposition party list, led by Tymoshenko and former foreign minister Arseny Yatseniuk, running neck-and-neck. Much will depend on how successfully the

regime can use its access to the machinery of government to massage the vote, and whether other parties that win seats choose to ally with Regions or the opposition.

Money often buys support in Ukrainian politics, and Regions has more of it at its disposal. One smaller party, Forward Ukraine, which broke away from Tymoshenko's bloc, has been running an intellectually vacuous campaign ('new people for a new country') backed by extremely expensive advertising. It has latterly recruited as a candidate Andriy Shevchenko, Ukraine's world-class soccer star, who joined the party soon after an audience with Yanukovich. The party leader, Natalia Korolevska, claims that they are a true opposition party, but it is far from clear where their money is coming from, and most expect them to do a deal with the Party of Regions as soon as the elections are over.

Another sporting hero, world heavyweight boxing champion Vitali Klitschko, is also leading a party that seems destined to win quite a few seats. Klitschko sounds more oppositionist than Korolevska, but he has maintained some ambiguity about his future intentions.

If Yanukovich is able to cobble together a clear win in the elections, or assemble a financially lubricated coalition after them, it seems likely that what remains of Ukraine's democracy will be under serious threat.

In Moscow, after the humiliations and anxieties of the parliamentary and presidential elections, during which he was booed in public and street demonstrations became almost commonplace, the old Putin has re-emerged with most of his customary self-confidence restored.

The recovery in his demeanour was slower than might have been expected. His formal inauguration was held during a quiet time in early May, with his motorcade's route to the Kremlin sealed off from ordinary Moscow residents and protesters. The televised event made the city of some 13 million look eerily like a ghost town. Elsewhere in the city, scuffles broke out between smallish groups of opposition supporters and police, as had happened on the day preceding the ceremony.

Since then, though, the Kremlin has undertaken a consistent campaign to cow the opposition and get its members permanently off the streets. Prosecutions, house searches and confiscations of property relating to

the May street clashes are continuing. Despite its own embarrassments, the ruling United Russia party has regained its vigour and resumed doing what it does best, guaranteeing that legislation required by the Kremlin is passed in quick time with scant regard for procedural niceties. Some members of the tame parties that are allowed into the Duma have put up a bit of a fight but have been swept aside.

Draconian penalties (US\$9,000 – roughly equivalent to the average Russian's yearly income) were legislated for anyone participating in an unauthorised public demonstration, or breaching the conditions of authorisation. The new penalties for organisers are even more severe, rising to US\$30,000 for any groups involved.

Libel and slander have been recriminalised, a rebuff for Dmitry Medvedev – former president, now prime minister – on whose watch such offences had been decriminalised only a few months earlier. Like many Russian laws, this is likely to be an instrument of 'selective justice', wielded against those identified as enemies of the regime.

Another new law subjects the internet to close invigilation and sanctions, including the summary closing of websites, ostensibly to protect the young and vulnerable from pornography and the like, but with ample scope to be used against websites critical of the regime. And any NGOs that receive money from abroad must register and declare all such sources, and identify themselves publicly as 'foreign agents'. With its strong Stalinist redolences, this tag should suffice to make most Russians wary of having anything to do with them. Other such measures are reportedly under consideration in United Russia's suddenly hyperactive law-making circles.

Putin's determination to stamp out opposition was also reflected in the recent trial of three members of Pussy Riot. The arts and entertainment communities have turned against him in recent years, and the Kremlin clearly judged that the group was a suitable target to be made an example of. Putin's faithful allies in the Orthodox hierarchy (Patriarch Kirill is widely believed to have been a collaborator of the KGB since Soviet times) called for the young women to be punished appropriately, and most of Russian society also strongly disapproved of their antics in the Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. In fact,

the three young women disported themselves there for only 40 seconds before cathedral officials removed them; most of the impertinence was spliced in later.

As time went on, the public, including Orthodox believers (not a huge group within the Russian population – many identify as Orthodox, but only a small minority are devout or observant) began to feel that the accused should not be punished too severely. The legal basis for the trial was manifestly shonky and international condemnation became intense. Even Putin himself, who was undoubtedly angered by their call on the Virgin Mary to ‘drive him away’, seems to have had second thoughts – or at least affected to have second thoughts as he observed international reactions – and expressed the disingenuous hope that they might not be punished too severely. Whatever the propaganda value domestically, the trial was clearly becoming severely damaging internationally. As Stephen Sestanovich, the distinguished Russian expert and former senior official in the Clinton administration remarked in commentary on the trial, ‘Russia has not seemed as unattractive or unappealing as an international player in a long time’.²

Another target of Putin’s wrath has been Ksenia Sobchak, the daughter of his former boss and close friend, Anatoly Sobchak, the Yeltsin-era mayor of St Petersburg. Ksenia is widely rumoured to be Putin’s goddaughter (though she has denied it). A glamorous and successful media personality and socialite, she has in recent months emerged as an oppositionist. As a reward for this public-spirited makeover she has been removed from her roles in the state-controlled media, but has become a star on the internet, gradually overcoming the initial mistrust of other, more longstanding, opposition activists.

Along with other leading opposition personalities, she was subjected to a sudden house search by police early on the morning of 11 June 2012. The police, who were obviously expecting to find her current live-in boyfriend present, read aloud love letters they found in her flat and confiscated over US\$1 million in cash.

² See Stephen Sestanovich, ‘What’s at stake in Putin’s Culture War’ (interview with Jeanne Park), Council on Foreign Relations, 17 Aug. 2012, www.cfr.org/russian-federation/stake-putins-culture-war/p28814.

The purpose of this operation was to show the Russian public that oppositionists are very wealthy, probably thanks to their treacherous contacts with Western organisations, and that they lead enviably dissolute lives. There is a Russian saying to the effect that a peasant is happy to be poor as long as his neighbour doesn't prosper; envy has been one of the emotions Putin's election campaign and recent policies have used to excite popular resentment against his middle-class opposition.

Putin's longstanding family friendship with the Sobchaks makes it likely that Ksenia's selection as a victim of this operation was cleared with Putin; Ksenia's mother, Lyudmila Narusova, is the widow of Putin's former mentor, the one-time mayor of Petersburg Anatoly Sobchak, at whose funeral he publicly wept. Narusova is a member of the upper house of the Russian parliament, where she too is under official fire for opposing recent authoritarian legislation.

Repressive action has also been launched against two other leading oppositionists: Aleksey Navalny, the anti-corruption blogger and author of the politically effective phrase 'party of swindlers and thieves' to describe United Russia; and Gennady Gudkov, a Duma deputy from the tolerated opposition party A Just Russia. Navalny has been charged with stealing a large amount of timber in a period when he was working as an adviser to a liberal and ex-dissident provincial governor. The charges have been used against him in the past but collapsed, even in Russia's accommodating judicial system. This time they may be forced to succeed, leaving Navalny facing a possible 10 years' imprisonment.

Gudkov, who has been the most active oppositionist in the Duma, has been charged with owning a private business – which has suddenly become an offence for public officials – even though he divested himself of any managerial responsibility. Many United Russia deputies are known to be in the same position, but no charges have been laid against them. Gudkov, curiously, is an ex-KGB colonel like Putin, but his recent activities would have struck the president as a case of inexcusable treachery to his former service.

Internationally, a major factor contributing to Russia's image problem has of course been the Kremlin's determination to protect the Assad regime in Syria as it continues to slaughter its domestic

adversaries in a sectarian cause. More generally, Putin has continued the anti-American and anti-Western animus of his election campaign pronouncements. Disregarding the fiscal objections of his old comrade, self-exiled former finance minister Aleksei Kudrin, Putin has returned to his election theme of a huge arms buildup with a new/old twist: as in the Stalin years, to which he often looks back with nostalgia, he argues that a buildup would catalyse a new flowering of industry and technology in the country.

Even with oil prices as high as they currently are, Russia's public finances are vulnerable; in the absence of any plausible enemy, the buildup makes little financial or strategic sense. Yet Putin is planning to sink an additional US\$970 billion into defence equipment by 2020, with an increase in overall defence expenditure of about one third by 2014.

Western leaders enjoyed the four-year holiday from Putin while the more emollient and liberal-sounding Medvedev was supposedly the custodian of Russian foreign policy. Some even appeared to genuinely believe that this was the case, or at least to behave as though it were, in the hope that this would somehow help Medvedev to grow into the job. But he either could not or chose not to.

Following on from his humiliation last September, when he had to announce publicly that he would vacate his post in favour of Putin because of Putin's superior merits, Medvedev has now had to endure attacks on his courage and competence in handling the outbreak of hostilities with Georgia in August 2008. In an internet documentary marking the fourth anniversary of the war, a group of retired generals blame him for his allegedly slow and hesitant response which, they claim, cost lives. They take the opportunity to praise Putin for having administered a kick to those in Moscow who were holding the high command back from getting on with the task. Putin has also made public statements implying that, though he was away at the Beijing Olympics at the time, he nonetheless stayed in touch with (read: in control of) events by telephone.

Though he is still prime minister, Medvedev's position looks weaker than ever, as Putin builds his Presidential Administration into a dominant force that is able to second-guess or overrule ministers and ministries as required. Some economic liberals still remain in the

upper reaches of the elite, and many in governing circles are thought to be unhappy about Putin's repressive course domestically and his belligerence on the international scene. But for now they don't seem to be exerting much influence.

So Western leaders are stuck with Putin, possibly even for 12 years, and while there is not a great deal they can do about it, they clearly are not enjoying the prospect. Even Germany – where Putin spent his only foreign posting with the KGB (in Dresden, East Germany) and where his interpersonal skills and strong command of the language won him a good deal of initial sympathy after he became president – seems to be tiring of him. The economic links will undoubtedly remain very strong, but Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Joachim Gauck, both East Germans, clearly find him distasteful. And the German press has become sharply critical. *Der Spiegel* reported that, on his last trip to Germany, Putin forced Merkel to wait for an hour for a meeting with him. This curious form of discourtesy towards foreign interlocutors seems to have become more frequent – he recently infuriated the Ukrainian leadership by keeping Yanukovych waiting for five hours in Kyiv for a bilateral meeting while he met with a group of Russian nationalistic bikies in Crimea.

US ambassador Mike McFaul, a key architect of Obama's 'reset' policy towards Russia, was subjected to months of crass harassment earlier this year, clearly officially inspired and publicly and coarsely endorsed by the Russian Foreign Minister. If Obama is returned to office, and Putin's belligerence towards the United States persists, Washington's approach to Russia may become cooler, particularly once the US drawdown of forces from Afghanistan (for which Russian cooperation is important) is well advanced. If Obama is defeated, a Republican administration's approach is likely to be very different, as the team behind presidential candidate Mitt Romney has already signalled.

Having embarrassed their reset partner Obama with sustained public anti-Americanism through the Russian election season and since, Putin and his spokesmen have now joyfully grasped Romney's tough campaign pronouncements about Russia, which were made in response, as proof that they were right to see the United States as a dangerous enemy in the first place.

Moscow was recently buzzing with excitement about a new report produced by the Minchenko Consulting Group, based on interviews with experts and well-placed figures in the elite, which sought to analyse how Putin's inner leadership circle operates. According to the report, this 'politburo', as it is described, contains key oligarchs and others who are hardly household names in the Western media. Putin is described as a *primus inter pares* – first among equals – an arbiter who settles all disputes that arise between the various competing clans and factions but does not enjoy a position of complete dominance. Surprisingly, the consensus of the Minchenko group seems to be that Medvedev remains a significant player with some prospects for regaining greater influence.

The biggest sensation in the report, perhaps, was that the inner circle allegedly envisages the possibility of a crisis arising in which it might become necessary to change the leadership. Depending on the circumstances, the decision might be to entrust the country and the elite's joint fortunes either to former finance minister Kudrin, an economic dry and political moderate, or to the belligerently anti-Western Deputy Premier responsible for defence industry matters, Dmitry Rogozin, a talented populist with KGB connections and strong support from Soviet nostalgics and hardline nationalists. On the face of it, Kudrin is still out in political no-man's land, running a think tank that produces statements and reports critical of the regime and calls for dialogue with the opposition. Rogozin's likely approach as leader would be the diametrical opposite of Kudrin's.

Some might think that the report underestimates Putin's position, while overestimating Medvedev's. Putin is more than an arbiter deriving his power from his role in keeping powerful warring clans apart. Russia has a history of powerful supreme leaders into which Putin fits nicely. *Capo di tutti capi*, or boss of bosses in a disreputable gang, would probably be a more accurate term than *primus inter pares*, with its prime ministerial connotations. One also wonders whether a change of leadership could really be brought about coolly and rationally in quite the way suggested by Minchenko. But the report is probably indicative of a certain turbulence close to the surface of Putin's third term.

Will the move against the opposition result in mass repression, or only the imprisonment of some on trumped-up criminal rather than explicitly political charges? Outside Chechnya and its neighbours in the mainly Muslim-populated region of the North Caucasus, where there is a slow-burn insurgency, Putin has largely sought to avoid bloodshed in dealing with domestic opponents. Inconvenient individuals have frequently been killed by 'unknown assailants' and the crimes never satisfactorily explained or resolved. And at the very beginning of Putin's ascendancy in Moscow, just after his period at the head of the Federal Security Service (FSB), the main successor to the KGB, a series of mysterious bombings of apartment buildings in Russia, officially attributed to Chechen terrorists, caused heavy loss of life. These events remain murky. Many observers have concluded they were a provocation staged by the FSB.

Generally, though, Putin's rule has been a soft or consensual autocracy resting on his authentic popularity as well as on manipulation and coercion. Now that his popularity seems to be fluctuating downwards, a greater degree of force may be deemed necessary to strengthen the 'power vertical'.³ My sense is that Putin will try to make telling examples of particular individuals who have earned his wrath but will avoid mass repression. It is hard to feel confident, though. There are anxious rumours circulating, for example, that recent steps taken or threatened against officials with private businesses or property abroad could morph into a wider purge of the bureaucracy.

Putin's recent political travails have left him eager, at the very least, to reinforce his power and end the indignities that he's been forced to suffer in the past year or so. As his legislation moves from autocracy towards the police state paradigm, the leader too may transition from autocrat towards dictator. Fear is never too far away in Russia, and many once venturesome public commentators can now be seen hedging their bets with respectful references to Mr Putin as a very intelligent man, who may, they hope, decide to become another Stolypin, and so on.⁴ Putin seems to like this comparison (despite the fact that Stolypin's career ended in assassination), so those seeking his

3 See Andrew Monaghan, 'The Russian *Vertikal*: the tandem, power and the elections', Jun. 2011, Chatham House Russia and Eurasia Programme Paper, www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/19412_0511ppmonaghan.pdf.

4 Pyotr Stolypin was the Tsarist prime minister, 1906–11, who ruthlessly suppressed disorder, but pursued small 'liberal reforms'.

favour probably see it as the way to his heart. But on his record, one would have to say that just as Dan Quayle was no Jack Kennedy, Putin is no Stolypin.

Commenting recently on Putin's latest macho stunt (assisting a group of threatened Siberian cranes to return to the wild), Gleb Pavlovsky, a one-time insider, observed that the optics of this operation were unfortunate. Bloggers had been unkind, one insider even claiming that some of the cranes had died or been injured during preparations for the hang-glider flight, though this item was quickly removed. In Pavlovsky's view, Putin should have been advised against making this mistake. But 'now there is no one who would tell him "Ne nado Vladimir Vladimirovich" ["Best not, Vladimir Vladimirovich"]'.⁵ Pavlovsky's comment about the absence of any effective opposition to Putin's political impulses within the regime is probably applicable to all issues, not just endangered cranes.

Putin is clearly increasingly exercised by the growing tensions in society. One matter of particular concern to him is Islamic militancy. In recent weeks the once nationalist, but now increasingly Islamist, turbulence that is endemic to the North Caucasus region has suddenly manifested itself in violence against moderate clerics in Tatarstan, a mixed but mainly Muslim-populated republic on the Volga in the Russian heartland. Tatarstan has been regarded till recently as a multicultural success story, where Russians and Tatars lived together in harmony.

This is an ominous development for Putin and for Russia. If pressed, Putin might well argue privately to a European critic of his domestic regime that Russia, with its 15 per cent Muslim population and other potential ethnic stresses, faces a much more serious problem of social cohesion than any Western European states. The presence of Muslim immigrant communities in Western Europe that are much smaller than Russia's, he might argue, has nonetheless led to the emergence of virulent anti-immigrant movements and parties that have sometimes entered governments. Should Russia proceed along that path, he might ask rhetorically.

5 See 'Gleb Pavlovskii: Putin stavit kakoi-to novy spektakl', *Vlasti.net*, 11 September 2012, vlasti.net/news/149409.

But the radicalisation of Muslim ethnic minorities in Russia has been greatly facilitated by the brutal war in Chechnya and indiscriminate use of force in the North Caucasus region generally during Putin's ascendancy. Moreover, in the past Putin has often flirted with Russian nationalism in various forms. Lately it has become clear that he sees some dangers in enfranchising that phenomenon. Nationalism, however, remains a pillar of his domestic support and one that could be exploited by potential rivals like Rogozin if Putin seemed to be renouncing or downplaying it. While continuing to push Russian 'patriotism', he is trying to soften its edges, and is increasingly inveighing against nationalist extremism of any sort. The country's burgeoning right-wing Russian extremist movements have at last been encountering more pushback from the security services. But the genie seems to be out of that bottle.

Domestic developments in Russia do not seem particularly propitious at present for a smooth transition to a more open, pluralist and tolerant society, despite the growing pressure for such an evolution coming from the urban middle classes. Similarly, a more authentic 'Europeanisation' of Russia, despite the greatly increased people-to-people contacts of the last 25 years, does not seem to be imminent. As well as his domestic policies, Putin's foreign policy seems to stand in the way. And the unending eurozone crisis or crises have done much to reduce Europe's attraction as a role model. Europe's declining influence is evident not only in Putin's periodic slighting public references, but also in the attitudes of his counterpart autocrats in Ukraine and Belarus.

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