

## **All Sewn Up?**

*Gareth Davies reviews the recent parliamentary election in Russia and asks where it is all going.*

It seemed like a done deal. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's nomination of his mentor and prime minister, Vladimir Putin as candidate for the next March's presidential election had all but sealed the latter's return to the throne after four years of not-quite-absence.

But as with so much else in Russia, looks can deceive. The shock collapse in support for Mr Putin's United Russia party in the recent parliamentary elections has challenged assumptions of his easy return to the top job. True, United Russia did gain a majority of seats in the Russian Duma, but that is a steep drop from the absolute control of the lower house that they had before.

If that were not enough, United Russia's moral authority, and that of the Putin-Medvedev 'tandem' at its head, has been severely dented. Mr Medvedev may well now be counting the personal political costs of being so tied to the Putin brand. For brand it certainly is. This is the brand that won all the plaudits – not entirely without merit, but not entirely deserved either - for restoring Russia's standing in the world after the implosion of the USSR and the chaos that followed. This is the brand that produced a strongman, so beloved of Russians in time of national crisis, who would take on and humble Russia's foes at home and abroad; a strongman, aloof, yet strangely 'present' in the minutiae of the struggles of ordinary Russians. But this brand's star is waning.

Widespread allegations of ballot-box stuffing and other electoral fraud, with even the Communists threatening a legal challenge to the result, have made this election much more toxic for Mr Putin and United Russia than previous elections when similar allegations were made. This is because United Russia garnered less than half of the votes cast. If some of those votes were stolen, as the other parties and civil society organisations claim, then this spells further trouble for the ruling elite in the months to come. Former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, himself no friend of Mr Putin, has called for a re-run of the election.

### **On the way out?**

For Mr Putin, the election is a severe embarrassment, if not more. This election was personal, since it was the Russian electorate's first opportunity to make its voice heard following his nomination to return to the presidency he vacated in 2008. And the Russian electorate, or at least a substantial proportion of it, is not having it. Not since the Kursk submarine disaster in 2000, or the Beslan school tragedy in 2004, has the shine been so unceremoniously wiped off the Putin brand.

First, it had been known in the corridors of power for several months that United Russia was stagnating in opinion polls. In May, Mr Putin set up the All-Russia United Front to combat this by recruiting new vision, and hopefully, votes – to the party's cause. The election demonstrated that this initiative has failed.

Second, the national print and electronic media is under the direct, or indirect, control of the Kremlin. But there is increasing evidence that people just do not believe the stories they are being told in the television and print news. So while United Russia was able to count on the output of the state controlled media, it could not count on the support of its end recipients. One measure of this is the internet, which, though watched by state security organs, is not actually censored. This may change. The social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, were heavily used in the initial protests. Surprise, surprise, one Kremlin-backed newspaper has publicly called for regulation of the social networks.

Third, Mr Putin's public allegations that foreign powers acting through local NGO's were seeking to destabilise the political process, are ludicrous, if not laughable. This is a central line of the Putin narrative and it has always been so. In fact, something like it has persisted since the days of Ivan the Terrible and his struggles with the Tatar/Mongol horde. On this narrative, Russia is and always has been, surrounded by her enemies within and without, who want to pull her apart. But one has

to wonder who, in such troubled economic times as this, would want to stir up instability in other places, especially in Russia. And who would want to rock the boat of a country with such huge quantities of the very oil and gas reserves those economies need for their recovery, not to mention her huge stocks of weapons of mass destruction, which could easily fall into unfriendly hands in such a situation. Furthermore, Mr Putin's allegations appear to credit foreign players with more influence over Russian opinion than he has – hardly the proudest boast for almost a decade of state control of the media, and a personality cult that would be the envy of any Western politician.

Fourth, Mr Putin is to some extent the victim of his success. A Russian economy that was prostrate in the 1990's has risen to become a very different beast today. This economic renaissance was powered by surging oil and gas receipts in the early noughties. While this did not stand Russia in the best stead to withstand the economic crisis of 2008+, she is certainly not suffering as much as many other countries. One result, however, of the boom years has been rise of the Russian middle class, and it is noteworthy that television pictures of the protests appear to show mostly young, middle class and educated people on the march. These are exactly the people who Mr Putin would have expected to be most grateful for their good fortune in today's Russia. The unspoken line is, "We gave you all this, so in return, keep your snotty little noses out of politics." You can be assured that Mr Putin's private choice of invective is much stronger than that. The truth is that Mr Putin's appeal – despite the best (and worst) efforts of Nashi, the Kremlin-backed youth movement, and other instruments of the Putin cult – is generally to those of the older generation. These are the people with sharp memories of the chaos of the Yeltsin years, those who knew first-hand the certainties of the Soviet world and watched with disbelief as they crumbled all around. Those memories and the fear that accompanies them, are receding. He has rather less appeal to others of more recent political awareness.

Frankly, people are fed up. Some, undoubtedly, have realized the possibility of the Putin era stretching to 2024 - since a constitutional amendment during United Russia's ascendancy changed the presidential term from four to six years - and they do not like it. Mr Putin could be elected in 2012, and again in 2018. Such a possibility, in theory at least, makes 2011 just the mid-point in that era. Russians may not be overly sympathetic to the niceties of liberal democracy, but they do not like being taken for granted. The planned job swap at the top will not have gone down well with many, and this election gave people their first opportunity to voice their opinion over this.

This observer's conversations with ordinary Russians have shed some light on the sickness at the heart of Russian polity. One merely said that Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency next year was inevitable, with a note of resignation. Another, with more than a hint of disgust, said that he is no longer popular, a point that was borne out recently when he was jeered and booed at his last public appearance before the election. Still another said, 'If you steal from a supermarket in Russia, you go to jail. If you steal an entire train, you end up in government.'

This latter comment highlights Mr Putin's absolute failure to tackle the one thing that grates on the vast majority of Russians – corruption. According to Transparency International, Russia ranked 154<sup>th</sup> out of 178 countries and territories whose countries were measured according to the tolerance of corruption within their borders in 2010. Hardly a ringing endorsement for the record of someone who campaigned (with some success) against corruption in his early years as president. True, there were his public campaigns against the despised 'oligarchs.' But the biggest case of international note, that against Yukos founder Mikhail Khordorkovsky, seemed to have more to do with the latter's political ambitions than with the evidence of the case. If, as Mr Putin said during Khordorkovsky's appeal last year, "A thief belongs in prison," then why are so many others in Russia's oligarchy not also serving time behind bars?

## **Game over?**

It would, however, be naïve indeed to suggest that the Putin era in Russia is on its last legs.

First, the opposition is disparate and disunited. That is one result of a decade of domination by Mr Putin and United Russia of the political agenda. So, while the protests have managed to put enormous numbers of people on to the streets, and have been seemingly well-organised, it is difficult to see how these could translate into a political force for positive change, rather than just a negative reaction to a flawed election. Furthermore, one of the main chants of the protests has been 'Russia without Putin.' While such sloganizing would have been unthinkable just a couple of years ago, it does not suggest clear thinking about who the alternative might be. Those whose hats are already in the ring have run against Mr Putin before. One new contender has emerged for the presidential election next year – Michael Prokhorov – but he is an oligarch, and it is difficult to see how the protest movement would see him as an asset. Conversely, it would be easy for Mr Putin's machine to exploit him as a liability for the opposition, and on past form, Mr Putin is unlikely to stop there.

Second, we should not doubt Mr Putin's ability to recapture lost ground in the hearts of ordinary Russians. An example of this occurred during the wildfires emergency in the summer of 2010. While visiting one of the devastated areas, Mr Putin was jostled by babushkas angry at having lost their homes with no help from the emergency services. Mr Putin ordered the entire village to be rebuilt. He even had webcams mounted at various points on the construction site so he could monitor progress directly from his Moscow office. On completion of the work, he was welcomed with open arms by the very people who had jostled him months earlier. He may yet appease many of those who are protesting his rule now.

Above all, it is worth remembering that Mr Putin is a survivor, and eleven years at the top of Russian politics does not come without having fought many political battles – too many for us to detail here, but the point should be made nonetheless.

## **An elephant in the room**

Then, there is the elephant in the room – the North Caucasus, whose instability may yet save – or break – the Putin phenomenon ahead of next year's presidential election. The Caucasus rarely makes the news, even in Russia. That is more because of the way the news is managed rather than because of any substantial pacification of the region. This observer has written [elsewhere](#) about how a tiny corner of Russia has helped shape Russian politics – not least helped Mr Putin's career – for a generation, and may continue to do so. Mr Putin staked much of his political capital on pacifying the region and integrating it with the Russian whole, something he has manifestly failed to do. We may hear more from the region in the coming weeks and months.

## **A drunken man?**

Expect instability in Russia over the coming months, which could be imagined as like a drunken man trying to make his way down a street. This is a dangerous time in Russia. The Putin brand has been losing its shine among the Russian electorate for some time, but it is not spent yet, and could even repackage itself ahead of the presidential election in March. Mr Putin is not the only one in Russia who will be hoping that today's protests will be a distant memory by then. And other players on Russia's frayed southern edge may bring their own 'contribution' to the dance of the authorities and protesters. Meanwhile, Scripture's injunctions to pray for good government and for those in power are as relevant and urgent for Russia and its leaders now as at any time since the fall of the Soviet Union.

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