Russia Today: A Brief Survey of Opportunities and Challenges Facing the Church

'If you go down to the woods today, you're sure of a big surprise.
If you go down to the woods today, you'd better go in disguise.
For ev'ry bear that ever there was will gather there for certain,
because today's the day the teddy bears have their picnic...

So begins the children's nursery rhyme. And in 2008, the bears certainly came out to play. After a bull run lasting more than ten years, it was the turn of the bears as stock markets crashed and banks failed under the impact of the worldwide credit crunch. Meanwhile, to the east, another bear crept out of the shadows to sit in the president's seat in the Kremlin: Dimitry Medvedev (whose surname means 'bear' in Russian), protege, and some would say, stooge of former President Vladimir Putin. The announcement in December 2007 was given great credence, since he was Putin's preferred choice, On the inside, Medvedev was a member of the 'St Petersburg set' with which Putin had surrounded himself throughout his political life; on the outside, Putin had so re-shaped the electoral landscape that there was never any likelihood that Medvedev would not win the presidential election in the spring of 2008.

And riding high on surging oil prices, the bear that is Russia itself stormed across the Caucasus mountains to settle old scores with its pesky southern neighbour, Georgia. But in a number of ways the dismemberment of Georgia marked the high-water moment of the bear that was Vladimir Putin's Russia. Its economy has been hit hard since, by the credit crunch. Many of the vital statistics are heading in wrong direction. Social unrest is rising, and the Kremlin's response has become increasingly authoritarian as it tries to keep the lid on it. Many of the likely negative developments in 2009 and beyond are likely to be continuations of trends already apparent in Putin's tenure, although accentuated by the economic crisis: increasing racial and regional tensions; increased authoritarianism; continuing depopulation; pressure against the church.

Why the bear?

But first a trip down memory lane. The bear first emerged in nineteenth century Russian literature as an icon of Tsarist Russia, although its roots go back further, in this observer's view, to the reign of Ivan the Great from 1462-1505. This was when Russia's self perception began to change, from one of obeisant vassal to the Mongol/Tatar horde, to that of master of its own destiny (and that of others). Though an icon of Imperial Russia, the bear successfully transferred employment to become an emblem of the Soviet state after 1917. Another change of employment followed the emergence of post-Soviet Russia, and particularly that which developed under President Putin (2000-2008). Its fortunes had never been so great as under Putin. The bear became the logo of the dominant United Russia Party. And when oil prices surged past $100 a barrel, it seemed invincible.

A Great Fall

Vladimir Putin's popularity ratings remain above 80% (they have never been on the low side), a not insignificant achievement considering the steepness of Russia's fall in the past twelve months. And those of Dimitry Medvedev are also above 70%. But these mask other trends of significance. The economic 'miracle' of the Putin years tended to be overstated, both by the Kremlin establishment, and by external Russia-watchers, who could not or would not see beyond the veneer of the miracle. It was conveniently forgotten, for instance, in Putin's Russia, that economic recovery began soon after the devaluation of the rouble in 1998, when Boris Yeltsin was still in office, if not necessarily at the helm. That recovery continued during the Putin years. Real incomes rose enormously on surging oil and gas receipts and increased demand at home and abroad for steel, aluminium and other materials with which Russia is blessed in abundance. For this observer, it has been a real pleasure to see even ordinary Russians benefiting from this turnaround, although its benefits have hardly been felt far beyond the major towns and cities. Control of Russia's economy is still in the hands of the very few, those most trusted by the Kremlin elite. And for all the talk of Russia's economic miracle, her economy was and still is, hugely overbalanced towards oil and gas. This was all very well in the good years, but it masked weaknesses that are now all too apparent with oil prices hovering around $45 a barrel. The stock market has fallen two-thirds since the spring of 2008, Russia's economy is in serious trouble, and the Kremlin knows it.

New Ghost Towns?
The Kremlin is acutely aware of the potential for unrest in Russia's so-called mono-cities, towns whose economies are almost entirely dependent on one firm or industry. There are many of these, hangovers from the era of Soviet central planning. One such is Magnitogorsk, a city of more than 400,000 people, a few hundred miles east of Moscow, most of whose giant steel mills are either idle or operating below capacity because of the worldwide downturn in demand for steel. Social tensions are rising, and Magnitogorsk is not alone.

What is breaking down is a tacit contract between the political elite and the wider population, whereby over the last decade, the latter readily accepted state encroachment on political freedoms in return for rising living standards. This is not new. Russia's history provides plenty of examples of a trade-off between people's economic well-being and their pursuit of political rights. When the economic chips are down, the pursuit of political rights goes up. State-control of the media (a central part of the architecture of Putin's Russia) has now become a double-edged sword. In the good times, people readily accepted the news as it was interpreted through the Kremlin's various mouthpieces. Now, according to a recent poll, less than 30% of the population believe that they are being told the truth. By any reckoning, that is an alarming statistic, and one the Kremlin's opinion formers can ill afford to ignore. As recently as March 27th 2009, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* quoted the Levada Centre as reporting in a recent poll that nearly a quarter of Russians would consider joining protests against falling living standards, while more than half now think the country is headed in the wrong direction.

Centralisation and Fragmentation
Furthermore, the centralising tendancies of the Putin era have come to mean that the Kremlin is less immune to public censure now than when the economic indices were on the upside. For instance, Putin's abolition of regional gubernatorial elections in 2004 (following the Beslan school siege) drew howls of protest from abroad, yet it was hardly contentious at home. But now it means that crises anywhere in Russia directly concern the Kremlin, no matter how distant they are from the centre. Hundreds of miles to the south, for example, is Ingushetia, in Russia's restive North Caucasus. Ingushetia is a failed state with 70% unemployment out of a population of 300,000. Its reputation in the fields of human rights and corruption is unenviable, to put it mildly, and the security situation there is so tender that secret police officers now routinely travel on the buses. Indeed marrying into the security forces is reckoned to be one way of securing a comfortable life, with a salary augmented by bribes. Late last year the Kremlin decided to remove the compromised and deeply unpopular (but Putin-appointed) President Murat Zyazikov from office. In reality, it had little choice, given the ferment that Ingushetia is in right now. Riven with banditry, it's economy is a basket case: it has seen little fruit from Russia's boom years. What will become of it during the slump is a very open question, but expect more instability on Russia's frayed southern fringes.

Next door to Ingushetia is Chechnya. No-one can speak with certainty of the long-term effect of the economic downturn on a republic that has fought two wars with Russia in the last fifteen years. The conflict was prosecuted on both sides with appalling brutality. Although Chechnya is currently 'pacified,' and hostilities have officially ceased, this hardly constitutes the rule of law, when Russian and pro-Kremlin forces operate as if they are that law. Chechnya's tensions could easily boil up to fight another day in a few years' time. When people are feeling the pinch in regions with such contorted histories as the Caucasus, unsettled scores rise easily to the surface, like bubbles in water.

Meanwhile, in Russia's far east, Vladivostok to be precise, tension over import tariffs to protect Russia's car industry recently spilled over onto the streets. The local car servicing industry drew much of its income from imports of right-hand drive Japanese cars. The local police (who themselves drive such cars), were either unable or unwilling to contain the protests. So a crack police detachment from Moscow region (5000 miles away) was sent in to quell the unrest, increasing the region's sense of alienation from the centre.

Meanwhile, the depopulation of Russia continues apace. A couple of years ago, this observer noted a statistic of one death every 15 seconds and a birth every 21 seconds. There are a number of reasons for this. Alcoholism has long and broad roots in Russia. Towards the end of the Soviet period, half the country's health problems were said to be alcohol-related. In parts of Siberia, the decline of certain people-groups has been directly, though not exclusively, attributed to alcohol, since alcohol tolerance among these groups is reckoned to be lower than in their European counterparts. Tackling alcohol abuse in a country with such a long history of it is neither easy nor popular. It was said that one thing that Soviet governments feared as much as the threat of attack from outside, was a revolution on the inside, should the supply or price of vodka ever be adversely affected. The central planners took careful note. In the Protestant churches

today, alcohol consumption is almost universally proscribed. While the positive effects of this are to be welcomed, the result often is churches with a dearth of men, with negative consequences for the long term health and growth of those churches.

HIV/AIDS is on the increase in Russia, mainly due to the use of shared needles by drug-users, but also egged on by the taboo with which this subject continues to be treated in Russia today. Only in the last few years has the state begun to allocate significant resources to tackle HIV and AIDS, and awareness is growing at last. But until recently, a doctor could refuse to treat a patient who admitted to having HIV. Russia has a long way to go if it is to prevent HIV/AIDS becoming a major problem in years to come.

What of Medvedev?

So where, in all this, is the new President of Russia, Dimitry Medvedev? And what direction is the Russian bear going to take under him? This is no small question. The announcement of Medvedev as Putin's preferred successor in late 2007 led to gushing comment from enthusiastic liberal observers, who fell over themselves to predict a new dawn in Russia. The reality is much more complex. True, he is the first President of Russia not to have any background in either the Communist Party or KGB. True, Medvedev's public comments on the rule of law and democracy place him firmly on the liberal wing of the Kremlin establishment. True, he is occupying the Presidency, which under Vladimir Putin, saw its powers greatly enhanced. And Medvedev, being in his early 40's, is also young enough to wish at some stage to articulate those powers in a new direction, to develop his own legacy. Whether he will do so, or be able to do so, is far from certain.

During the second term of his presidency, Vladimir Putin faced many calls for a change in the constitution to allow him to run for a third term. The Russian constitution then only allowed two four-year terms. But while he did nothing to discourage those calls for change, Putin doggedly refused to bow to the pressure. Maybe he was already aware that the Russian economy, so dependent as we have noted, on its oil and gas receipts, was heading for trouble, and therefore felt it better not to be in the President's seat when the grapes turned sour. This would give him a sound basis to return, legally, when the current crisis matures, and Russia, once again seeks a strongman to lead it through. Putin's KGB background may also have informed his decision: in the Soviet period, it was customary for a company or administrative unit to have a titular head, while real power lay with his deputy, who was almost always a KGB placeman. It is therefore easy to imagine a situation in which Medvedev holds the office, but Putin (as Prime Minister) operates the switches: a classic KGB fix. Never has the office of Russian Prime Minister enjoyed such prestige, power and visibility as it does now. And indeed the KGB, or FSB, as it is now known, has never had such power as it has in today's Russia. And this is largely the work of Putin. Even in the Soviet period, the KGB was at least nominally subject to the Party, an arm of the state. Now, according to *The Economist*, it is the state itself, a 'spookocracy' whose tentacles are increasingly reaching into every area of national and economic life.

What of the Church?

United in suffering, under Communism, the Russian church has with notable and worthy exceptions, returned to its former schismatic ways. Pentecostals don't generally talk to Baptists, Baptists don't generally talk to Charismatics (who form a separate denomination in Russia), and many in the Orthodox hierarchy yearn for the day when they're the only game in town. The current trajectory of legislation is heading in that direction. Yes, the Russian constitution guarantees all confessions equality before the law, but for years observers, including this one, have noted that the playing field is more level for some than it is for others.

The schismatic nature of the Russian church is in part due to the legacy of Communism, where churches were pushed to the margins of society, and penetrated by the state security apparatus. High doctrinal fences were erected to make sure that individual believers truly were 'one of us.' Other churches were regarded with suspicion. Few knew this better than Josef Stalin, when as leader of the USSR, he amalgamated several denominations in one church, Oleviste, in Tallinn. This, he felt, was a sure way to discredit the church, since by forcing different denominations together, he could ensure that the whole thing would fall apart, and publicly. It did not. And under the godly leadership of men this observer has met, a little-known, but widespread, revival began, which touched the far edges of the USSR in the 1970's. That it has been possible for denominations to come together in this way should give hope for the future of the Gospel in this desolate land.

The church has faced other challenges too: Communism also gave rise to a stream of thinking, particularly among

Russian protestants, that saw social action as the preserve of the state. Many churches were slow to respond to the Gospel imperative of social action, even after the fall of Communism, but the picture is more mixed now. This observer has even seen a church-run drug rehabilitation centre, which over the years of operation has seen many lives transformed, to the wider benefit of society. Churches together in some places, are making a difference where churches apart in other places, are not.

In missiological terms, we need to recognise that huge mistakes were made in the early 1990's, many of which had their origins outside the former USSR. This early period following the fall of Communism saw a surge of missionary activity, much of it insensitive to the cultural context. Teaching on what it meant to be a 'successful' church drew, by and large, on the 'mega-church' models found in the West. In the new freedoms of the early 1990's, there was much Gospel fruit, but there was also bad fruit. At its worst, the bad stuff expressed itself in various forms of prosperity teaching. This played to the very real hunger among Russians for a better quality of life, but also left many disillusioned, as Russia lurched from one economic crisis to another in the 1990's. Some mega-churches really went for it in size when they built their buildings. Ampitheatre-like constructions, focused on a 'stage' where the ministry happened, owed much to their origins in the West. They were also indebted to a Soviet-era mindset, among church leaders in the early 1990's, who saw 'big' as the main criterion of success. 'Big' was everywhere in Soviet Russia. In public works programmes, such as the building of the Moscow Metro in 1931, in huge reservoirs, and blast furnaces of the iron and steel industry, and Stalin's 5-year plans, 'small' was never in the design vocabulary.

The consequences for individual accountability, discipleship, and leadership development cannot be overstressed. So while Russia's economic revival sowed some of the seeds of decline of Gospel hunger in the new Russia, some seeds were sown by the missionary movement itself. This observer has noted cavernous partly-built constructions, nowhere near completion: buildings that can be requisitioned by the authorities with a simple change of the locks. We need only look to the last century to see how plausible that outcome can be. It is ironic indeed, that the mega-churches and their leaders may not in fact succeed in passing on something bigger and more lasting than themselves to the next generation.

Some time ago, this observer took a senior Russian church leader to Mongolia, to witness a church-planting movement in the Gobi Desert. The Russian noted how the new churches of the Gobi would meet in 'gers,' traditional Mongol tent homes, and the obvious benefits of this for accountability, discipleship, mobility and multiplication, all of which are crying needs in Russian churches. It was as if, by visiting the Gobi, he saw the future of the Gospel in Russia: small, accountable and mobile groups, which would sit light on the need for property, groups more easily able to discern and develop new leadership for the next generation: mice that might more easily evade the bear, if it were to turn on them.

The Bear and the World

It is tantalising to ask whether the Russo-Georgian war would have happened, if Russia's economic situation today had prevailed then. There is no easy answer to this, since the question is hypothetical. Russia's ability to break out beyond its borders has been severely weakened by the economic crisis. But it is unlikely that Russia would have stood the humiliation of its pesky southern neighbour invading its 'protectorates' of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. After Serbia and Kosovo, this would likely have been a humiliation too far for Russian foreign policy. Nor should we expect, as part of the slightly increased emollience of Russia toward its Western neighbours, a thaw in its relations with Georgia any time soon. Nor should we expect an early withdrawal of its armed forces from the breakaway regions, despite the expense of keeping them there. In fact, historically, Russia has never given up conquered territory, as witness, in the last World War, the seizure of Sakhalin island from the Japanese, and Kaliningrad (formerly East Prussia), from the Germans, both now incorporated into the Russian Federation.

We also need to take account of recent changes in Russia's military doctrine. For decades, Russian and Soviet military planning was based upon NATO being its principal external threat. This is not the case now, despite appearances to the contrary. The old planning involved keeping large-scale forces, mostly conscripts, towards its Western borders, as well as a stockpile of costly nuclear weapons. It also entailed Russia having some of the worst-disciplined armed forces in the developed world. There is a downsizing happening, as Russia moves from largely fixed conscript, to mobile professional armed forces.

The new doctrine does away with the notion of a large-scale external threat posed by NATO. One reason for this is NATO's apparent disarray in Afghanistan, with calls for extra forces to face down the Taleban threat going almost unheeded, and national contributors having caveats on what their forces can do on the ground. Another reason for this

shift of focus was Georgia's ability to shoot down Russian planes during last year's brief war. That Georgia should have been able to do anything in the face of the massive Russian onslaught was an embarrassment to Russia's military planners, and one they intend to rectify. The move towards professional armed forces will almost certainly release funds to replace a lot of ageing military equipment, as well as help Russia face down growing threats from Islamist terrorism, and a rearmed and resurgent Georgia.

There is a concerted effort by the Kremlin to soften Russia's image abroad, particularly in the West. Indeed, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* recently sought to portray the bear, not so much in terms of its size (it goes without saying that the country and animal are both enormous), but rather in terms of its diet (the animal's is three-quarters vegetables and fruit), and outlook (bear attacks on humans are exceptionally rare). Russia needs capital inflows now, and it also needs investors. To be seen as a threat is the last thing it needs right now.

Synthesis?

If we were to put some kind of synthesis on all these currents in Russian society and politics, what might it look like? And what pointers does it give us to the likely behaviour of the Russian bear in coming years? A Russia that until recently had seemed so certain of its place in the world, has been wrong-footed by the world recession, and now seems unsure of itself. Regional tensions are rising, as the economic steamroller grinds to a halt. And the reaction of the authorities is leaning on the authoritarian foot. It is unlikely that the cheerleaders of Dimitry Medvedev will be vindicated anytime soon. Churches, squeezed by Russia's prosperity, are being further squeezed through low-level harrassment and legislative hurdles. Expect more of the same. Wrong models of church from without, and schismatic tendancies within have hobbled the church's witness. But there are notable exceptions, and it is in these that there are pinpricks of light amid so much darkness: as witness the areas where churches are reaching across the denominational fences; churches that are taking hold of the Gospel imperative of social action; churches also, that are availing themselves of other models of being church in this beautiful yet deeply needy land.

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