

## PROLOGUE

In his seminal study of France, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, Alexis de Tocqueville concluded that ‘the most dangerous moment for a bad government usually is when it starts to reform’. This maxim was generously applied to Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms and the fall of the Soviet Union. The reverse proposition may be more appropriate for Russia after twelve years of rule by Vladimir Putin. The lack of reforms and the stifling of political and social life are the root causes of the contest that destabilised the regime in late 2011.

Two decades after the end of the Soviet Union, the Russian political system is in turmoil. Among society as a whole as well as among the elites, a growing clamour of voices is questioning the viability, efficacy and legitimacy of the power system consolidated by Vladimir Putin since 2000. Widespread corruption and electoral fraud have triggered criticism and protest from a small but vociferous segment of civil society. The political crisis is particularly significant as it stems from the poor judgement and dysfunctional behaviour of the leadership’s inner circle. By its very nature, such a closed decision-making group is ill-equipped to tackle political problems beyond the restricted horizon of the chosen few.

The final updating of this book was completed in October 2011, just after Putin publicly announced that he would stand for president for a third time, on 4 March 2012. This prologue was written in the early days of 2012 just as the volume was about to go to press. I wish here to shed some light on the post-electoral protest and the reversal of fortune suffered by Vladimir Putin and the ‘dominant’ party, United Russia. The core findings and theses of this book help analyse the destabilisation precipitated by the electoral cycle of 2011–2012.

## RUSSIAN POLITICS: THE PARADOX OF A WEAK STATE

In the realm of institutional studies, the research I conducted on elections, federalism, and the defeat of constitutionalism in the 1990s and 2000s substantiate the main argument that a democracy cannot be built solely on elections, but needs both a free and fair vote and the rule of law if it is to prosper. 'Electoral democracy' is a misnomer, all the more so when electoral campaigns are unfair, ballot boxes stuffed, and results made up behind closed doors. The Orange Revolution in Ukraine in December 2004 was a case in point: hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians occupied Maidan Square in Kiev for nearly three weeks to protest the rigged presidential election and call for new elections. Russian leaders probably believed they were immune to political accidents.

From a sociological point of view, Russians' support for Putin throughout the 2000s was undoubtedly an essential ingredient in the building of a personalised, clientelistic and authoritarian regime. As explained in chapters 4 and 5, support for the elected president was not to be equated with genuine popularity in a country where people were offered no credible alternative to Putin. In this '*bezalternativnaya sistema*' (one-choice-only system), most opposition figures had no access to the public spotlight or television. Many Russians agreed with Putin but distrusted his government, administrations, and 'business oligarch' friends.

Consequently, as soon as the leader's authority and charm fail to impress, which is almost inevitable after twelve years at the helm, support for the system as a whole dwindles. And if the leadership cannot or do not want to resort to large-scale repression, they are faced with a genuine political challenge.

The paradigm of 'elite loyalty' proves absolutely crucial. As Putin's power system is being contested by a more assertive civil society, its survival depends on the attitudes of the economic, administrative and intellectual elites that generate Russia's wealth. And the behaviour of the elites in turn depends on the wider mood in society. The crux of the matter is the triangular schema presented in chapter 8—society, elites at large, and the ruling groups—and the way in which the three bodies interact. In their response to urban discontent in December 2011, the central authorities tried to sow the seeds of distrust and discord between the active and affluent middle class and society as a whole. The ability of new figures and movements to propose an alternative government depends on enough citizens withdrawing support from the current system. Without street demonstrations in many Russian cities, opposition leaders

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would not have been able to gather political momentum and form a united front.

The regime began to feel vulnerable in early autumn 2011 and was openly challenged after the rigged elections of 4 December. The moment of truth occurred on 24 September 2011 when Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev, in a grimly humourless double act, announced that they would swap seats a few months later, with Putin regaining the presidential chair, and Medvedev casually taking over the post of Prime minister occupied by his mentor since 2008. In open contempt for their citizens, the two men insisted that the arrangement had been sealed a long time ago. This public announcement reinforces one of my main arguments, namely that the 2008 'non-succession'—the invention of an executive tandem—was a major distortion of the spirit and letter of the 1993 constitution. The arrangement was devised to provide Putin with a loophole to circumvent article 81 of the Fundamental Law, which limits a president to two consecutive terms. It also generated the *de facto* transfer of considerable prerogatives from the president to the head of government, without any revision of the constitution.

The effect of the advance notification of yet another staged succession in September 2011 was devastating. Russians felt humiliated, at best indifferent. The reaction came quickly, and was unexpectedly strong. Several close allies of Putin disapproved of the pre-arranged game of musical chairs, the most high-profile being Finance Minister Kudrin who was forced to resign. On several occasions, Vladimir Putin was booed in public. More important still, the Internet buzzed with vitriolic criticism of Putin, shrewd jokes and mocking caricatures. Millions of people surfed the web, viewing the renowned blog of the lawyer and staunch Putin opponent Aleksei Navalny, to the *Grazhdanin Poet* (Citizen Poet) postings of the writer Dmitry Bykov and thousands of other lively sites. Protesters organised themselves via Facebook, getting prepared for election monitoring on 4 December. The Internet, in particular YouTube, transformed the traditionally predictable elections into an astounding, multifaceted expose of the ballot-rigging and gross violations of voting procedure in every corner of the Federation of Russia. It is also thanks to Facebook that the demonstrations of 10 and 24 December 2011 were adeptly organised in several dozen Russian cities.

What added backbone to the anti-Putin protest was the unlikely chorus formed by a few establishment figures like Aleksei Kudrin and Patri-

arch Kirill, popular writers like Boris Akunin, non-parliamentarian opposition leaders like Vladimir Ryzhkov and Sergey Udaltsov, high profile bloggers and journalists like Alexei Navalny and Mikhail Fishman, and longtime dissidents like Sergey Kovalev and Liudmila Alexeeva. Protesters were mostly urban-dwellers, younger rather than old, and representing diverse political strands, from democratic, neo-Communist, to nationalist. While no overall leader galvanized the emerging waves of protest, several individuals and movements have given some structure to the angry citizens' stand.

Universal suffrage is not a benign institution. Even in an authoritarian regime, where the police and intelligence services are very powerful, ballots cannot be tampered with endlessly. And in December 2011, the authorities came unstuck. Having acted in an unconstrained and unsanctioned manner for many years, electoral commission staff, bureaucrats and top government officials alike overstepped the mark. The fraud was palpable, there for everyone to see with their own eyes, on a computer screen or a mobile phone: ballot boxes already stuffed with votes, empty polling stations which reported a 90% voter turnout, bawls between independent Russian observers and electoral *apparatchiki*. The most extraordinary declaration occurred in Rostov province, entertaining millions surfing the web: on television on 4 December a young female presenter, in all seriousness, announced the preliminary results, declaring that the total of all parties' percentage of the vote was 146%—to accommodate the instruction from on high to allot 59% of the vote for Putin's party, her colleagues having forgotten commensurately to reduce the other parties' percentages. As usual, Chechens who mostly stayed home, were responsible for a 93.3% turnout and a 99.4% vote for United Russia. According to seasoned election experts from Russia and abroad, fraud was estimated at around 10–15% on average.

The authorities believed that they had held the popular will in check and that Russians would not risk rocking the boat. They nevertheless had to use administrative manipulation and fraud to produce the desired outcome: a majority of seats for the dominant party, United Russia, in a legislative ballot which was meant to be a rehearsal for Putin's reelection as president in March 2012. They thereby further degraded the key institution of free universal suffrage, the expression of popular sovereignty, at a time when they most needed that institution on which to build legitimacy. They played with voters and with legal as well as 'illegal' opposi-

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tions. They tried but failed to fake a 'managed pluralism'. What happened reveals how little attention the leadership devoted to social realities in their own country and to developments outside Russia, and how little they knew about the political histories of neighbouring European countries. It has often proved to be an unsuccessful gamble to introduce pluralism in elections yet seek to retain absolute power over all public institutions and control over economic resources.

The Arab revolts of 2011 and the fall of well-entrenched dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen have raised alarm in Moscow and taught Putin at least one lesson: to stay in power, repression is not the solution, and some kind of compromise has to be found.

Election-rigging is not a new phenomenon in Russia, yet earlier elections had not generated similar protests. Four major factors may explain what occurred in 2011.

The first is, very simply, the passing of time, the perils of repetition and fatigue. Putin won his first race in 1999–2000. The electoral cycle of 2011–12 is the fourth such 'managed' contest, with roughly the same parties and presidential candidates taking part, Medvedev having played the role of stand-in for Putin in 2008. Always the same primitive discourse and stage-managed campaign. And invariably similar results whatever the context: about a two-thirds turnout and over two-thirds of votes going to the incumbent. Putin's rule has been hit by the well-known phenomenon of erosion; he can no longer reinvent himself.

The second reason is disappointment, bordering on deception, at Medvedev's stepping aside to let his patron back in the presidential seat. Dmitry Medvedev was not meant to be the real boss, and most Russians understood the ruse and voted for him in 2008 in order to keep Putin. Nevertheless, political life became so stifled, and Putin so confident that he could stay on for ever, that many wished for Medvedev to fight for reelection. Even in his master's shadow, a younger and more amiable man offered some prospect for more modern and open ways. To more critically minded people, as well as to middle-class conservatives, Putin's one-man rule no longer held out the promise of a better future.

A third reason is corruption. The protestors of 2011 for the first time accused Putin, his friends and party cronies of being 'thieves and crooks'. They meant that the system is corrupt both economically and politically. Hence, the two can no longer be separated. Putin is the national leader and the patron of the oligarchic and unaccountable system that is anal-

ysed in the second half of this book. Until the war in Georgia and the international financial crisis of 2008, most Russians believed Putin to be a tough but fair and efficient leader. As the oil windfall dwindled and the rulers felt less confident, people started to look at them more critically. Their wealth appeared to be huge and disproportionate in contrast with Russia's stagnant economy and glaring social disparities.

A fourth and momentous cause of post-electoral unrest is the growth of the Internet. In 2011, the number of regular Internet users reached 50% of the populace, among whom a growing number are active users of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the like. They are fluent in hightech communication and compulsive networkers. They are opening new modes of social or group interaction where they outwit official webmasters, FSB experts, and spindoctors.

The irony in Vladimir Putin's misfortunes in 2011 is that he fell into a trap of his own making. He believed that the formulae that had worked so well over ten years would continue to perform. For example, he decided to crack down on media freedoms and relied on biased confidential sources of information. He freed administrative bosses of democratic accountability and judiciary sanction, but needed them to rule the country, which they were bound to do less and less effectively. He has deprived himself of the best Russian minds, the dedicated men and women who could have conducted long overdue reforms, in Moscow and in other Russian cities, towns and rural areas.

Vladimir Putin did not think in terms of 'already twelve years in power', but rather 'another twelve years ahead' since he was aiming at getting reelected president twice for a six-year term. Society, however, is never perfectly still and orderly. The social realities fluctuate, even without reform from above or demands for change from below. Putin was concerned not to repeat Gorbachev's 'mistakes' that, in his view, led to 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe in the twentieth century', i.e. the fall of the USSR. He ought to have paid more attention to Boris Yeltsin's mistakes and Brezhnev's stagnation, the famous *zastoi* which he started to reproduce.

All politicians, in Moscow and in the provinces, Putinites and opponents alike, feel the necessity to address society's mood and needs, to be attentive to the 'moral temper', to use Nathan Leites's phrase. Before 2011, neither side was particularly keen to talk to the 'masses'. The times have changed. The regime may still rely on the conservative mood of

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many in Russian society who look on, anxious not to live through troubled times again and prepared to go along with the current power, or a similar type of rule, with or without Vladimir Putin.

Since the late 1990s, rulers have hollowed out public institutions and disregarded the democratic principles of good governance. That has helped them consolidate their unchallenged grip on power, but it has backfired. When it needed them, the Putin regime lacked the efficiently run federal, regional and local institutions required to reform government and create new social momentum. The paradox of Russian politics is that of a strong power based on a weak state.