

# Reflections on Putin's Rise to Power

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Suddenly, something in the mysterious and unpredictable realm of Russia looks not merely predictable but destined to happen. It is almost embarrassing to analysts, who are used to the bubbling contingency and the byzantine, robust action of Yeltsin's decade. Mr. Putin is considered unstoppable in his march to the Russian presidency by virtually everyone, significantly including his opponents. It is indeed the ultimate degree of power when challenges seem improbable to the potential challengers themselves.

The big question now is what can a ruler endowed with such hegemonic powers do? But first we must address the nasty speculations surrounding the miracle of Putin's political birth.

## **"Wag the Dog" Suspicions**

Supposedly, the imminent presidency of Putin can be derailed only by some extraordinary revelation--namely, the one regarding the origins of terrorist blasts in Russia in 1999. Yet even this obstacle is probably just an unlikely possibility. In the short run, Putin is safe on this account. After the decade of "compromising material" wars, it would be next to impossible to make a convincing case, even if his putative opponents acquire direct evidence of satanically dirty provocation. Arguably, counter-evidence will follow immediately. "Kompromat" is effective as a psychological weapon only under certain conditions. It is not a legal factor in Russia, where the judiciary (like the rest of the state) is semi-privatized by the competing political cliques and, not too unjustly, is taken practically for granted as one among several weapons of intrigue that constitute the advantages of state office.

The longer-term prospects look less encouraging. The muted controversy surrounding the origins of the bombings reveals the reigning mistrust in the Russian political class and society at large. Putin must eventually produce convincing evidence of Chechen or Islamist conspiracy (I earnestly hope that he will offer something credible and independently verifiable)--or nasty suspicions will be waiting to return with a vengeance at the first crisis of his popularity. Thus, the fall 1999 bombings (and the even more suspicious failed attempts) threaten to remain a persistent political nightmare--hardly helped by the fact that in this case the old principle of *cui bono* falters completely, for there are too many plausible suspects.

On the one hand, this is an instance where hideous conspiracy is a credible possibility. "Wag the Dog" became a cult movie among the new breed of mercenary Moscow spin doctors and media propagandists. This example perfectly illustrates the brutish provincialism of new Russian elites vis-à-vis the West that developed in the late 1990s. (The attitude of "been there, screw them all" is just another stage of provincialism--what Turkish sociologist Faruk Birtok wryly calls "YuPPPism," from "Young Urban Peripheral Provincial Professionals.") The film, which to Americans is a wildly grotesque satire, only confirms the conviction of many "nouveaux Russians" that it is the actual way things are done in the hypocritical, capitalist West. The subtlety of satire is lost and the fictional plot, taken at face value, actually licenses the behavior that it satirizes. Of course, the authors of "Wag the Dog" (Mamet, De Niro, Hoffman) are no more guilty than the authors of "The Godfather," which was exploited to refine and institutionalize the professional culture of actual Mafiosi. The problem already existed. Among the people who are in and particularly around power in Russia, blunt cynicism and immoralism amount to a consciously made, existential option.

Therefore the doubt is not so much whether Putin's incredible rise to national leadership was inspired by an American film, or whether the current Kremlin goblins were morally prepared for absolutely anything--but whether they had the organizational capability to calculate, execute, and keep secret such an outrage. We must admit that we often underestimated their (likely intuitive) astuteness. It might be added that we probably focus too much on the traditional coercive institutions--either state (such as the numerous successors to the KGB) or classically criminal. This ignores the fact that nowadays these are rather the poles of a continuum where the sprawling middle is occupied by the hundreds of private security agencies, some arguably better financed, equipped and professionalized than their state counterparts.

On the other hand, I see at least equally many reasons why a Chechen group could have conducted the bombings--punishing the enemy population when one cannot protect one's own is a tactic recognized at least since the aerial campaigns of World War II. Practically all Chechen military leaders, with the stubbornly noble exception of President Maskhadov, are on record openly threatening the populations of Russia with terrorism and (in the case of Shamil Basayev in 1995) the "hypocritical" West. The previous war in Chechnya began with a bizarre series of hostage-takings around the Minvody airport that seemed genuine. It is unlikely that the trade in hostages and the many assassinations of the last three years were entirely foreign provocation. (Here we may find the origins of recently manufactured Russian weapons captured in Chechnya: guns could have been supplied instead of money ransoms. It would clearly be much cheaper for Russian officials. This looks scandalously irresponsible, but significantly less hideous than what is now suggested.) As to the Chechen rationale and motives, it is apparent that Basayev, Khattab and Udugov could be carried away by their and their retainers' restless machismo and amateurish ideological fantasies.

Finally, we cannot exclude the exotic possibility that somebody else (Osama bin Laden or not) from far outside the former Soviet realm managed to recruit a local group of followers and strike for whatever purposes in Russian population centers. Bombings in

Tashkent in early 1999 at first looked so puzzling that they were almost automatically blamed on the arguably despotic President Karimov himself. Only later we learned about a certain Mr. Pyatnitsa Namanganskiy (Juma'a Namangani) and equally sinister types lurking behind the backs of Afghan Talibs. Stranger things have happened. The Reichstag fire of 1932, historians now believe, was not a Nazi provocation, but an opportunity that was readily exploited by the Nazi machinery of repression and propaganda, which was already positioned for a witch-hunt.

The sober conclusion to be drawn from all this is that we should probably not expect to learn the truth or, perhaps, we shall never feel confident that we know all the truth even if it eventually resurfaces in the murky whirlpool of post-Soviet intrigues.

Chechnya for the moment should not be Putin's major worry either. As long as Russian troops avoid the glaring stupidities of the last war, there will be no major setbacks to hurt Putin. In any event, he is not Pavel Grachev, whom the majority of Russians expected to be inept and reptilian in the first place. Putin's reputation is opposite that of court eunuch, and can absorb even some Russian casualties if they are presented as heroic--a propaganda task both likely and attainable insofar as many Russians seem ready to venerate a few new heroes.

### **Professional Spies on the Road to Public Power**

The medium-term balance can be established with sufficient confidence. The long-standing guesses regarding a military coup in Moscow were misplaced all along. In the Soviet framework the military was not the prime coercive apparatus. Obviously, it was the KGB, and it did try a coup in 1991 (probably in several other instances as well). The rapid and profound reorganization of the Russian political/power field since August 1999 amounts to a very successful coup. The December elections to the Duma make the monopolization of the central political arena and the governmental bureaucracies a fait accompli. The Russian provinces, including the variously separatist non-Russian republics, are left to negotiate the length of their leash under the new regime.

The question is what can Putin do with this concentration of power, beyond merely enjoying its fruits? It is very unclear whether, once firmly in office, the new President Colonel Putin will feel obliged to honor his debts to the vested interests whose machinations helped bring him to power. Putin's projected role of steely-disciplined, patriotic and ascetic leader (a typical Soviet-era idealization of the KGB officer) suggests no reason for enjoying a continued association with the infamous figures of Yeltsin's court--except blackmail.

The movement of KGB veterans to the Kremlin began more than a year ago, under the premiership of Primakov. It seems that we are poised to see in the near future the realization of Andrei Sakharov's most scandalous political prescription made in the early days of perestroika--to combat the pervasive corruption (i.e., oligarchic privatization of the Soviet state) by relying on the cadres of the most closed and presumably the least

corrupt of Soviet institutions, the KGB. Andrei Dmitrievich thus showed a good sense of sequencing--democracy could not develop unless the bureaucratic vested interests were reigned in, and the KGB appeared to him the best available tool under the circumstances. It was (ironically yet true) a relatively neutral force, an institution that under Andropov cultivated the imageries of exclusive heroic professionalism (to distance themselves from the dirty and often plain stupid things they were actually doing) and abstract patriotism (for how could anyone feel sincerely patriotic to the USSR of Brezhnev) .

This shouldn't surprise or scandalize us too much, for Sakharov was essentially a humanistic reformer. In retrospect he appears a far more practical thinker than anyone acknowledged during his lifetime. He was, as all revolutionaries, a man of utopian vision, but he was not a doctrinaire maximalist. Sakharov's political plan was a mental experiment, an attempt to name the minimal conditions that would allow institutionalization of basic intellectual, moral, political and economic freedoms. It is admittedly a fuzzy vision, in part evidently because Sakharov could not help noticing the critical gaps and contradictions in his own plans.

Yeltsin's reign ended amidst the conditions that one could have projected long ago, given the structures of Soviet power and their Russian legacy. In fact, these are fundamentally the same problems and constraints reminiscent of Brezhnev's twilight--twenty years later the problems remain quite familiar--only worse and flagrantly more explicit. Therefore the situation now bears similarity with the period leading to perestroika (1982-84). The comparisons drawn between Andropov and Putin are not merely superficial. But of course Putin is Putin, not Andropov today, and the year 2000 is different from 1982 (when Brezhnev departed from the scene) in many respects, including that there have been the revolts of 1989, 1991 and 1993.

Structures propose and humans dispose, and at the end of the day transient political moves and differences of personal experience or disposition could themselves become new structural constraints. The personality of Putin and the circumstances of his rise to power will themselves likely structure conditions of major consequence. The transient power struggles and even personal traits may leave a strong imprint on the emergent institutions. It is why we should be concerned with Putin's unknown personality, the anonymous circle of his friends and allies, and especially with the circumstances of his meteoric rise to power.