

Vladimir Putin and Russia's "White Revolution"

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All the meticulous plotting to avoid Ukraine's Orange Revolution resulted in — Russia's very own coloured one. But Russia is not Ukraine...

Russia's electoral scene has been transformed in the past two months, without a doubt inspired by the political winds from the Middle East and the earlier colour revolutions in Russia's "near abroad". Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's casual return to the presidential scene was greeted as an effrontery by an electorate who want to move on from Russia's political strongman tradition, and to inject the electoral process with ballot-box accountability.

Putin's legendary role in rescuing Russia from the economic abyss in the 1990s, staring down the oligarchs, reasserting state control over Russian resource wealth, and repositioning Russia as an independent player in Eurasia (not to mention in America's backyard) — these signal accomplishments assure him a place in history books. He and Dmitri Medvedev are considered the most popular leaders in the past century according to a recent VTsIOM opinion poll (Leonid Brezhnev comes next, followed by Joseph Stalin and Vladimir Lenin, with Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin the least popular). He will very likely pass the 50 per cent mark in presidential elections 4 March, despite all the protests during the past two months calling for "Russia without Putin". So why is he back in the ring?

It appears he was caught by surprise when the anti-Putin campaign exploded in November, fuelled by his decision to run again and the exposure of not a little fraud in the parliamentary elections in December. For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the opposition was able to unite and stage impressive rallies, one after another. Despite the chilling Russian winter, they keep coming — this week saw four gathering around Moscow, totalling 130,000.

The opposition poster children even include Putin's minister of finance Alexei Kudrin. Presidential hopefuls are Communist leader Gennadi Zyuganov (backed for the first time by the independent left forces), nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky, A Just Russia's Sergei Mironov and the oligarch playboy Mikhail Prokhorov — none of whom stand a chance of defeating Putin. This time there are 25 televised debates which began 6 February among the contenders, who are sparring with each other and "Putin's representative".

Is this quixotic march back to the Kremlin heights a case of egomania? Or is it a noble attempt to both cast in stone Russia as the Eurasian counterweight to an increasingly aggressive US/NATO, and shaking up the domestic political scene to make sure it will not slump into apathy when he himself passes the torch? And if things go wrong, is this Russia's very own White Revolution, long feared by the Russian elite, and long coveted by Western intriguers?

Russian politics has always confounded Western observers, and continues to do so. Putin is famously imperious and gets away with it. He taunted the opposition by saying he thought the original demonstrations were part of an anti-AIDS campaign, that the white ribbons were condoms. But he nonetheless sanctioned the largest political opposition rallies in the past 20 years.

US democracy-promotion NGOs such as the National Endowment for Democracy — a key player in Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution — are active in Russia's opposition, but Putin is clearly gambling that Russians can see past US efforts to manipulate them. Besides, the winners in the Duma elections were the Communists and nationalists, with pro-Western liberals placing a distant fourth — hardly the results NEDers would have wanted.

He is also famously willing to tell US politicians they wear no clothes — the latest, last week in Siberia: "Sometimes I get the impression the US doesn't need allies, it needs vassals." Russian foreign policy is now firmly anti-NATO, both with respect to the West's misguided missile system and its eagerness to turn Syria into a killing fields. Rumours that a Russian Iran-for-Syria deal with the West have proved empty. There are even hints that Iran may still get its defensive S-300 missiles from Russia in exchange for Russian access to the downed US drone. Iran claims to have four already and recently announced they have developed their own domestic version.

Pro-Putin rallies are as large as the opposition's, with an official count of 140,000 attendees at the festive gathering Saturday. The Putinistas even bill theirs as the Anti-Orange rally. "We say no to the destruction of Russia. We say no to Orange arrogance. We say no to the American government...let's take out the Orange trash," political analyst Sergei Kurginyan exhorted at Moscow's Poklonnaya Gora war memorial park. Putin thanked organisers, commenting modestly, "I share their views."

The real reason for Putin's return is due to the failure during his first two terms of his "sovereign democracy" to limit corruption in post-Soviet Russia. Instead, of producing a modernising authoritarianism along the lines of post-war South Korea, Putin's rule deepened corruption — the bane of late Soviet and early post-Soviet society. Instead of trading political freedom for effective governance, he clipped Russians' civil and political rights without delivering on this vital promise. Neither did he end collusion between the state and the oligarchs. That was the handle that badboy Alexei Navalni used to catalyse the opposition around his slogan that United Russia is the "party of swindlers and thieves".

This was the scene in the 2000s in Ukraine, where it was possible for the NEDers to undermine the much weaker Ukrainian state and install the Western candidate Viktor Yushchenko in 2004. However, instead of addressing the problems that led to the Orange Revolution, Putin focused on foreign threats to Russian political stability rather than paying attention to domestic factors, creating patriotic youth organisations such as Nashi (Ours) and the 4 November Day of Unity holiday – the latter quickly hijacked by Russia's nationalists.

But Russian fears of Western interference are hardly naïve. Russia was sucked into the horrendous WWI by the British empire, suffered devastating invasions in 1919 and 1941, and another half century of the West's Cold War against it. Further dismemberment of the Russian Federation is indeed a Western goal, which would benefit no one but a tiny comprador elite, Western multinationals and the Pentagon.

Putin's statist sovereign democracy – with transparent elections – might not be such a bad alternative to what passes for democracy in much of the West. His new Eurasian Union could help spread a more responsible political governance across the continent. It may not be what the NED has in mind, but it would be welcomed by all the “stan” citizens, not to mention China's beleaguered Uighurs. This “EU” is striving not towards disintegration and weakness, but towards integration and mutual security, without any need for US/NATO bases and slick NED propaganda. The union will surely eventually include the mother of colour revolutions, Ukraine, where citizens still yearn for open borders with Russia and closer economic integration. The days of dreaming about the other EU's Elysian Fields are over. The hard, cold reality today has bleached the colour revolutions, making white the appropriate colour for Russia's version of political change.

Of course, the big problem — corruption — is what will make or break Putin's third term as president. At the Russia 2012 Investment Forum in Moscow last week, Putin outlined plans to move Russia up to 20th spot from its current 120th in the World Bank index of investment attractiveness, by reducing bureaucracy and the associated bribery. “These measures are not enough. I believe that society must actively participate in the establishment of an anti-corruption agenda,” he vowed. Reforming the legal system and expanding the reach of democracy will be key to fighting corruption, not just via presidential decrees, but through empowering elected officials and voters. He confirmed this in his fourth major pre-election address this week by promising to provide better government services by decentralizing power from the federal level to municipalities and relying on the Internet.

So far things look good. For the first time since 1995 there will be a hotly contested transparently monitored presidential election, with the distinct possibility of a runoff (unless the new US Ambassador Michael McFaul keeps inviting NED darlings to Spaso House). The sort-of presidential debates, large-scale opposition rallies and the new independent League of Voters intending to ensure clean elections are a fine precedent, making sure that this time and in the future there will be an opportunity for genuine debate about Russia's future.

Despite all attempts to forestall Russia's colour revolution, it has begun — Russian-style — with no state collapse, but with a new articulate electorate, wise to both Kremlin politologists and Western NGOologists. Its final destination is impossible for anyone to predict at this point.

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