PUTIN PART III

By Florence Gallez

A question of Putin's intention:

Political apathy still rampant on the eve of Russia's new presidency.

I admit it: I slept through the Russian presidential election of last month, which saw Vladimir Putin win a third term for a newly extended period of six years. This is unforgivable given my lifelong fascination for Russia and eight-year stay in the country as Moscow correspondent prior to MIT. My life and duties at the Institute have indeed kept me very distant from all things "Russia" — 4,482.88 miles away to be precise (Boston-Moscow distance).

But my unprecedented distant indifference towards Russian affairs extends beyond geography. Perhaps, subconsciously, my mind is mimicking the mass political apathy that has stalled activism and civic progress in this vast land. Latest street protests apart, and broadly speaking, I believe it still persists in the national psyche.

In short, my initial response to the result on March 4 was: "Zzzzzz … Yawn … Zzzzzzz …" Not without good cause: this felt like déjà vu, big time.

Even to the casual observer, Putin's victory came as no surprise, as out of the five officially registered candidates he was widely expected to win after meticulously manoeuvring to hold his grip on power for more than the past decade. After his two initial terms as president, he remained very much the behind-the scene decision-maker as prime minister to then President Dmitry Medvedev. Medvedev, Putin's docile protégé, proposed in September last year that Putin stand for the presidency in 2012 — which Putin readily accepted, offering that Medvedev becomes his prime minister at the end of his presidential term by standing on the United Russia ticket in the parliamentary elections in December. The rest is well known to all: The tandem of leaders is untouched — they simply swapped places.

The means to such skilful political gymnastics also sound like a broken record to most Russians and foreign observers: rampant procedural irregularities, such as repeated voting and vote-count manipulation, and the castration of other candidates through state media propaganda that have been recorded at both the legislative election of December 2011 (which sparked the on-going protests in Russian cities) and this year's presidential one.

Perhaps, ironically, the idea of *Glasnost* (transparency) that former Soviet statesman Mikhail Gorbachev initiated in the late 1980s is alive and well in Putin's Russia. It is in fact amazing how openly Putin went about his game. Barely bothering to conceal his carefully engineered political moves, he essentially concocted his comeback in full view of the public: one did not need a PhD in political science or an Internet connection to see what was happening. Even the non-Internet users in far-away regions could hear Putin on state TV candidly explaining the type of duo leadership he had planned with Medvedev as his prime minister, could see Putin's constant say in every key decision, constant presence at every key event, and now can witness the full swap of positions taking place under their eyes.

Just like a doe-eyed, soft-spoken Michael Jackson candidly admitted in a TV interview with British journalist Martin Bashir that he let young boys sleep in his bed and told the world "Why can't you share your bed? The most loving thing to do is to share your bed with someone," Putin never tried to conceal or deny his intentions, and always calmly and openly explained to his people his goals and agenda. This included the nature of the dual leadership system with Medvedev, simply announcing in a March 24 speech in Moscow last year that he would swap jobs with Medvedev and return to the presidency. He did not say that he was running for anything. He just stated that he would be Russia's next president. Simple.

Whatever Jackson did or did not do with these kids in these beds, those two seem to share amazingly similar tactics when it comes to creating the appearance of honesty and innocence and manipulating their audiences to their advantage. Didn't Putin display a few tears on his victorious day? For more on persuasion and influence through candour and other emotions, see *The 48 Laws of Power* by Robert Greene.

In any case, the consensus among both Russia experts and the public is that Putin never really left, and everything was planned from the start.

But while it is widely recognized that Medvedev's presidency was merely a facade for Putin's game and planned comeback, it is most likely that Putin himself is acting as a facade for the influential forces acting behind the scenes and dictating the course of action for the country. The *siloviki,* as officials hailing from the Soviet security services are informally called in Russian, now a power-hungry, wolfish pack of well-heeled government officials and businessmen sitting in top Kremlin and private sector positions and all vying for more, enjoy close and influential relations with their former KGB colleague Putin.

Although still a mystery even to Russia insiders, most agree on two things: The *siloviki* are the ones managing the country and running the show, and they are here to stay. A fixture in the country's bureaucratic system, this powerful clan is bound to not only keep influencing domestic and foreign policy in the new government, but also to play no small role in the selection of Putin's successor.

If the West wants an idea of where the country is headed under Putin's third term then, it may do so not by "peering even deeper into Putin's soul," as it did upon his first election to the presidency, but by taking a closer look at this still little-analysed group and trying to understand its motives and next moves.

Now, if Putin is a pawn of sorts in the crusted bureaucratic system of Russian leadership, not so surprisingly the same could be said about President Barack Obama, many of whose policies have been perceived as pandering to the whims and interests of the financial and political elite manoeuvring in the backroom of American government to shore up the economic defence of its ranks. With Obama often appearing to serve the top of the economic hierarchy, and the various debacles the country has seen such as the bankster bailouts and debt ceiling crisis, it is tempting to say that here too, U.S. elections and politics are the face; business and the wealthy elite really call the shots.

Putin's high IQ:

Doomed resignation and passivity are embedded in Russia's national "soul"

One thing is sure about Putin: he is smart, very smart. You have to be, to maintain order over nine time zones, and stay at the top of the inner fightings of competing factions among the *siloviki,* desperate to protect the millions they have at stake from Russia's economic boom. Putin has proved himself uniquely able to adroitly balance the various strategic interests of the competing parties. He has so far been a master at managing divisions within the government — and Russians know this.

For all the West's predictions of Putin's impending demise and Russia's economic collapse should he chose to stick to his ways for his third term, there is plenty of evidence that he has stayed on top of his game and has managed the economy quite adroitly, given the global conditions. Despite being hit hard, Russia, after all, has weathered rather well both the 1998 and more recent financial crises, and growth can be seen on every corner (literally, if to take a walk along Moscow and other cities' mega-construction projects-strewn streets).

This is not to say that it is all rosy, nor to defend the system. All agree that Russia is overly reliant on its vast supplies of natural gas, oil, and precious metals, and statistics on the disparity between rich and poor show a widening gulf, to cite but two of the chronic ills.

Truth is, if Russia decides to pull the plug on its gas and oil supplies, it is Europe that will be sitting in the dark. The country still commands immense power, and it knows it. With this in mind, Western and Russian experts' dire warnings of Russia's imminent "death" if it does not diversify its economy — that have dominated their forecasts for virtually the past two decades — have clearly not come to pass. The country is sitting on some of the world's largest natural resources, and even though it is heavily reliant on Western technology and know-how to exploit them (the growing number of U.S. technology firms setting up shop in Russia is in fact evidence that U.S.-Russian business relations are doing great), its economy seems to be doing more than fine — including under Putin's rule.

In the same breath as its cries for the Russian economy to diversify, the West has been ardently calling for Russia to democratize, and similarly predicting doomsday scenarios if it doesn't. While both endeavours are not only laudable but also needed, they are often accompanied by a naïve, nearly-childish belief that every little sign of change in society spells the beginning of the end for Russia's authoritarian system and Russians' full, definitive embrace of democracy. This has been most notably on display within the context of the anti-government protests that shook the streets of major Russian cities and the Russian Internet in the wake of the controversial legislative and presidential elections of December 2011 and March of this year, respectively, with the U.S. and other Western media providing enthusiastic, in-depth coverage of the demonstrations across the country.

Perhaps still inebriated by the democratic successes of the popular uprisings in many repressed regimes of the world over the past year, some Western observers have been quick to draw comparisons with the Arab Spring protests, despite the vast differences in the context, motives, and goals of these nations.

If to single out one key difference that is particular to the Russian context, I would cite the sense of doomed resignation and resulting passivity that seem to be embedded in the Russian national "soul", especially when it comes to politics. Barely a week after Putin's victory, the admittedly substantial gatherings of demonstrators that had choked some of Moscow's streets and squares in the three weeks following the parliamentary election in late 2011 had dwindled to a mere 10,000 or so people, according to *The Los Angeles Times* and other media reports.

Some math about the Russian protests:

100,000 means little in a country of 143,030,106 people

While it is true that the 2011-2012 Russian street protests have been unprecedented in recent years in their scale — with a participation unseen since the 1990s — one may well want to take a closer look at the figures being trumpeted by Western and Russian pro-democracy observers and media (which incidentally have almost always been much higher than the official statistics from city authorities).

Describing one of the largest protests, *The Economist*, echoing many of its colleagues in the Anglo-Saxon press, exuberantly wrote: "But Russia is changing. A richer and more vocal middle class has sprung up, one that recognizes Russia as an ill-governed kleptocracy. The rigged parliamentary poll in early December was followed by street protests in Moscow and elsewhere. A demonstration in Moscow on February 4th got 100,000 people outside in a temperature of -22°C."

"100,000" — that's in a city with a population of 11,503,501, according to the 2010 Census. Similarly, U.S. and Western media reports have been replete with celebratory mentions of "thousands and thousands" of anti-Putin demonstrators and democracy activists in their coverage of the protests, ostensibly dismissing the fact that this is in a country with a population estimated in 2012 at 143,030,106.

Please help me with my math if I am missing something here.

As for "In a temperature of -22°C" (-7.6°F): Russians' Arctic cold-braving abilities have also been much extolled by these same media and are often presented as evidence of their passion for democracy. What these reports don't say is that (at least speaking to my knowledge for Moscow and Saint Petersburg) throughout the long Russian winters, theatres, cinemas, nightclubs, shops and restaurants are packed, and even in freezing temperatures, long lines can be seen at ticket sales booths in the streets, food vendors' kiosks and the entrances of entertainment venues. In other words, Russians are out and about —not hibernating bear style-like throughout the cold season, except for getting out to go and defend democracy in public spaces as the stereotyping Western media would like us to see them.

If to compare to the Middle East protests, citing just one case out of many: a full year after the first uprisings in the small island state of Bahrain, on March 9, 2012 "at least 100,000 people participated in one of the largest anti-government protests along Budaiya highway", according to CNN. "The march, estimated by opposition activists at between 100,000 and 250,000, filled a four-lane highway between Duraz and Muksha." (Just a little note in parentheses: these places are not mega-cities like Moscow, but villages; and these figures are out of a population for the state estimated in 2010 at 1,234,571).

If any sense of relativity matters, it is clear then that some American journalists and pro-Western paradigm defenders worldwide have been far too optimistic in their assessments of the Russian protests, and too quick to draw comparisons with the Arab Spring movements, or with any long, deeply-ingrained desire for democratic change.

The new Russians: emerging and educated?

The Russian middle class's love of liberal democratic values is too superficial to lead to change

The United States and its supporters have hardly been able to contain their excitement at the winds of democratic change that they perceive as blowing in the Arab world and other regions following recent anti-government uprisings. But this has often led to misinterpretation and inflation of the actual number and honourable motives of the protesters. The Western media's assessment of the recent street protests in Russia is no exception. The misjudgement and embellishment of the popular opposition and reactionary forces in Russian society by the West is in fact not confined to their size, but also their quality — or one could say, the "spirit" behind them.

This has been most apparent in the American and European media's descriptions of the emerging middle class, in which they also claim to see signs of true democratic efforts and evolution. While this has undeniably been the case, it does not hurt to question the rather short-lived acts of rebellion that the already waning activism on the streets attests to, or the lack of direction and organization of the political opposition, or the real motives and long-term goals and passions of the now more socially mobile segments of society.

Often described by optimistic Western commentators as "richer, more vocal (as here above), technology-savvy, and more educated and intellectually enlightened" than the rest of Russian society and their former repressed selves under Soviet rule, it is important to note that these qualifiers assigned to this 'new class' miss the point on several fronts.

The Economist, for example, reports, "A poll by the Levada Centre found a wide range of ages, incomes and political preferences among the protesters; they are not just the young, well-off middle class. What they have in common is their level of education: 70% were graduates." This omits the fact that even in Soviet times, Russia had one of the most highly literate and educated societies in the world. The present level of education of today's protesters, seen in that larger context, loses much of its significance and association with the desire for democracy.

The media has also focused on how this younger and more mobile generation has been acting as a "catalyst" for discontent now felt across the country. Again, while this is true to some extent, I do recall seeing the early steps of this nascent "creative class", as it is sometimes called, as a journalist in the early 2000s and as late as 2008, and speaking from my perceptions and for those years, this emerging middle class seemed, perhaps understandably, to be more interested in tasting the sweet pleasures of the Western life (with foreign travels and holidays, brand-name clothes, cars, and cosmetics, dining, and night-clubbing), than in defending liberal democratic values.

In fact, the latter have never really been a unifying factor or ideal national goal fervently pursued in the whole country at any given time in post-Soviet Russia — perhaps not surprisingly, given the size and cultural diversity of the country. This is not to say that democracy only suits certain cultures — obviously it doesn't discriminate. But you do need a unified opposition that can speak to all these diverse peoples in an attractive and coherent manner that makes sense to all — and this has been sorely lacking in the new Russia. So far, such pro-democracy efforts have been too isolated and unsupported by institutions.

There are other subtle signs that make me question the reportedly deep and long-date desires for democratic change that Western media and Russia experts are quick to attribute to whom they call "the children of the Soviet Intelligentsia".

Many among Russia's foreign trade and diplomatic partners are putting all their hopes on the higher echelons of this educated class — the well-connected, influential elite in business and the creative industries — but I have seen too many figures in these sectors keep their mouths shut about Kremlin abuses of power and other injustices, and suck up to the authorities.

While being precisely the people with the concrete means and public exposure to send some powerful messages about liberal ideals, many (although obviously not all) ended up openly supporting Putin's policies, simply because they feared losing their positions, plushy jobs, contacts, or whatever of value they might lose.

The reality in Russia is that wealth is acquired very quickly — but can also be lost tomorrow just as fast. Nothing is guaranteed in such an unregulated, dysfunctional system, unprotected by the usual legal guarantees one would expect from a democratic nation. And in such a dysfunctional environment, friendships and alliances are made — and dissolved — very quickly and unpredictably. The way post-Soviet Russia has been bullying its former "friends" — satellite countries of the former Soviet Bloc — is a sign of this on the scale of foreign relations.

But in the everyday life of Russian society, broadly speaking, I have often witnessed how some deep, usually long-nurtured values such as free expression, care for one's fellow beings, and independence, for example, are being sacrificed with little second thought for the immediate pleasures of a much more fickle and material nature.

An unloved intellectual:

Raisa Gorbachova symbolizes the uncelebrated intellectual

Should a majority of the Russian middle class truly venerate such values and the deeply-rooted intellectual ideals that Western observers tend to attribute to them, one may also wonder why there seems to have been so little display of respect and remembrance for the late wife of Mikhail Gorbachev, Raisa Gorbachova, the highly active and first university-educated First Lady of Russia. She revolutionized (if only briefly) her position in the Russian system of governance, with her involvement in children and women's issues and cancer programs, among others.

Sure, her husband is still reviled by much of the population for dissolving the Soviet Union's powerful empire and bringing about the political, economic, and social chaos that ensured. But that does not justify a lack of appreciation for her own personal merits and accomplishments — even before she married Gorbachev.

Yet, while there have been yearly visible gatherings and commemorations of anniversaries in public spaces for such questionable figures as Stalin, and even the non-Russian Hitler, Gorbachova seems to have been virtually pushed out of the headlines, as well as people's minds and memories. Personally, I don't recall any sightings or press reports of such public celebrations for her.

Ironically, while she never seemed to be celebrated "at home," by Russians, she was celebrated abroad. It was Western media and observers who lavished far more attention on her, with all the major American networks broadcasting her 1990 speech with First Lady Laura Bush at Wellesley College, for instance.

This is just one case — and of course, there are people who do remember and appreciate her. But the lack of mass appeal this true symbol of high intellectual and democratic ideals inspired in her people does raise some questions about the so-called "educated emerging middle class."

I fully realize that so far I haven't done justice to the many people in Russian society, from the ordinary "Ivan" to the more prominent and pro-active entrepreneurs who truly want and actively defend democratic change. I do not doubt that there are many of them across Russia, and that their intentions and deeds are genuine. In fact, despite hundreds of arrests reported in several cities, opposition leaders have vowed to resume their demonstrations in the near future.

But my goal here is to draw attention to the naïve, misplaced, and inflated U.S. and Western media's bias in their coverage of signs of democracy in Russian society (and perhaps I could tentatively throw in those of a few countries of the former Soviet Union such as Ukraine and Belarus). The Russian system seems to me still too encrusted in its old ways to say so optimistically that it has changed fully and for the long-term. While there is certainly beauty in the strategy of envisioning what one wishes for and seeking signs of it, the media should still report facts and the truth, and not yield to the temptation of inflating what it wants to see — and what Washington and Brussels want to hear.

A corollary of such hasty and optimistic appraisals of the protests and situation with Russian civil society in general is that they can lead to a quick dismissal of how much progress still needs to be made, and how serious the obstacles that lie in people's paths are.

Perhaps eager to get on with business, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton appeared to commit that very mistake by brushing under the carpet widespread alleged irregularities in the presidential election and declaring Putin the "clear winner," with whom the United States is now "ready to work with", *The Los Angeles Times* reported. Russian human rights activists denounced those comments as an insult to their hard work and concerns.

In any case, their indignation is certainly an encouraging sign that at least some segments of Russian society are more in touch with reality and pro-active than rosy-eyed Western analysts or the older generations who are often nostalgic about the more stable days under Communism. But even some of the younger generation have shown clear signs of fatalistic apathy when it comes to politics and bringing change.

At least some American news organizations have started to acknowledge the premature protest fatigue among Russian activists, following Russian media reports and a VTsIOM poll citing the shrinking size of the anti-Putin rallies soon after the election results.

But in a country where the authorities and the public are often at loggerheads as to the honesty of electoral proceedings and the veracity of the results — as in this latter presidential one, which included an allegedly foiled assassination attempt on Putin that is believed to be concocted by his team as a ruse to garner support for his election — it is very hard to discern facts from fiction, and interpret statistics and sentiments accurately.

Freedom: alive and well

Russia's Internet police is toothless compared to its Chinese counterpart

The objectivity of pro-Western (for lack of a better denominative) reports on the recent street and Internet activism in Russia must be questioned in a number of areas.

Depictions by U.S. and other English-language media of a Stalinesque Putin holding freedom of expression by the neck and strangling it simply do not hold when we consider the lively and unrestrained debates on the Russian Net. What is there that a Russian citizen today cannot write in a blog or online forum? Visions of the KGB (now FSB) breaking into your living room to arrest you over a LiveJournal comment, as sometimes allusively painted by the Western press, simply do not match the reality.

Reports of a criminal investigation launched against Moscow-based blogger Arkady Babchenko over an online post seem not only an isolated case, but also the result of a personal dispute.

Aside from isolated cases like this one, which are often reported by Western media as evidence of large-scale censorship, the Russian government has not appeared to have the technical means, discipline, or will — or all three — to regulate online speech as systematically and efficiently as China's Internet police does, for example. Rather, acts of repression have been much more random, selective, and minor if compared with some authoritarian states. Judging by how much prominent blogger and activist Alexey Navalny has been able to say on his LiveJournal and Twitter pages, unimpeded, or more broadly speaking, how a crucial role online social media has played in unmasking electoral fraud and rallying protesters, it is clear that free speech on the Russian Net is alive and well.

Clearly, if the government truly wanted to control speech on the Internet, it would have introduced restrictive legislation a long time ago. So far, there is no sign of this.

Similarly, the arrests of street demonstrators, widely reported by the media as evidence of a Soviet-style crackdown on dissent, take on a slightly different tone than Goulag-like repression if we consider a few factors rarely mentioned in Western press reports. While no doubt traumatized by the experience, most of the people arrested were detained for just a few hours. Navalny himself, presented by the news media to be one of the most vocal and biggest "threats" to the government, was released after paying a 1,000 roubles ($34) fine.

It is also interesting to look at who gets arrested and for what reasons. In the city of Kazan, police reportedly detained over 100 protesters, mostly in their early 20s, for failure to disperse. It might be worth asking here if the Kremlin really feels "threatened" by these youths, and is arresting them out of a real fear of escalating discontentment across the country, as many American media have depicted Putin and his policies.

I am more tempted to believe that the much-criticized clampdowns on pro-democracy supporters are more a show of force for domestic consumption, perhaps as a method of dissuasion, than a genuine fear of "the power of the people", "the destabilizing foreign elements aiding them", and Western-style Democracy uprooting anything Russian and taking its place on Russia's territory.

Such views of a Putin — and by extension Russia — as authoritarian because scared of losing power over his/its people are a recurrent theme in American and foreign media reports. In fact, recent commentaries by major media outlets on third-term Putin seem to rejoice in predicting a weakened president: "Russia's presidency: The beginning of the end of Putin", clamours *The Economist*; while University of Virginia Professor Allen C. Lynch also shows doubt in Putin's make abilities by asking in a commentary for CNN.com, "Will Putin be able to Russia great?"

Famous and fearless

Undaunted by dissent, Russia is reforming its own way

I do not believe that Putin — and even the Kremlin before him, and after him (under Medvedev) — is scared in the least, even by the rarely seen large-scale protests of recent months.

First, had the ruling elite truly felt threatened by such activism, city authorities would not have granted permission to most of these street rallies; then those who have been arrested and detained might have been subjected to worse treatment than they actually were. Finally, and most notably, we all know what happens to individuals the Kremlin truly considers threats to social order: they "disappear," fast and simple — Galina Starovoitova, a pro-democratic reform politician; Anna Politkovskaya, a Russian journalist and human rights activist strongly opposed to Putin and the conflict in Chechnya; Alexander Litvinenko, a former KGB officer, subsequently critical of the Russian secret services and of Putin, to cite but three examples. … All of them were apparently perceived by the authorities as being able to influence the political mood in the country, and were consequently "dealt with" — conveniently liquidated contract-style.

The list of such murders, many still unsolved to this day, is long. I believe these are the people whom the Kremlin truly fears. Thus, with all my respect for the laudable and much needed efforts of the brave and determined activists in Russian cities' streets and on the Net, in stark contrast to most U.S. and Western media which see in them the winds of change and a likely threat to Putin's rule in his third term, I would argue that very sadly, these efforts are kindergarten fare in his eyes. This is certainly an additional challenge for human rights activists and opposition leaders in Russia.

In the same vein, why would Putin dread the possibility of a "Colour" revolution and its repercussions? The mass civil resistance movements that erupted in several former Soviet "satellite" countries in the early 2000s following reports of electoral fraud and government abuses have been called by Western observers 'revolutionary' and 'the catalysts of a new era', susceptible to cause fear and therefore repressive responses in the ruling classes. Yet, while they have without a doubt exerted unprecedented popular pressure on the ruling structures, their resulting success was eventually modest, and in some cases short-term.

Ukraine's Orange Revolution that followed the 2004 presidential election is a perfect example, close to Putin's home. Although the nationwide protests were instrumental in getting the first results, believed to have been rigged, annulled and a revote ordered for later that year and in getting the Constitution to decentralize power from the presidency, the years that followed saw the political decline of pro-reform President Viktor Yushchenko, until he lost the presidency in 2010 to Putin's personal favourite Viktor Yanukovych. As for the constitutional changes of 2004, they were declared "unconstitutional" and overturned under the "pro-Moscow" leadership of Yanukovich.

While such a sad U-turn and reversal in the country's democratic development cannot be put entirely on the shoulders of the Ukrainian people, and their demonstrations are still a crucial step

forward, clearly, just like in post-Soviet Russia, liberalizing efforts in Ukraine seem to have been half-hearted, poorly-organized, and therefore short-lived.

Perhaps in their public addresses, Putin and Kremlin officials have only feigned concern about these shows of popular discontent in neighbouring countries when they condemned them (again — for domestic consumption purposes), because deep down they suspect that desire for change among the Russian people, as I argued here above, has only taken place on the surface, is not deeply-rooted and is therefore too superficial to cause a real threat to the present system. Just an hypothesis.

Put all together, I believe these observations lead to a very different picture than the fearful, destabilized and undecided, weakened post-Soviet Russia under Putin (as Prime Minister and President) that the American public has been fed by the mass media " and still is, when it comes to predictions of Putin's third term.

This goes too for the U.S. media's focus on "anti-Americanism" on Russian state media airwaves and supposedly growing dislike and distrust of the West among the population. While tensions in US-Russia relations on various levels are undeniable, absent from this news coverage is the fact that much of this anti-U.S. rhetoric from Russian politicians has a distinct domestic political purpose — "create an enemy at which to direct all your fears and discontent" is a well-known tactic in the internal politics of numerous countries.

Similarly misplaced are the reports in Western media on how Putin's speech police has killed humour and political satire especially. While it is true that shortly after coming to power for his first Presidency, Putin proceeded to control public discourse and ordered the discontinuation of, among others, the satirical political puppets show, "Kukli", not only Russians have now been exercising their laughing muscles on the Internet, unrestrained, but there have also been over the past decade and before plenty of jokes, sketches and stand-up acts in hugely popular comedy shows by The Comedy Club, broadcast on Russian federal television channel TNT, and the even more venerated long-running shows and contests of KVN (an abbreviation for "Club of the Funny and Inventive"), a humour TV show founded in 1961, whose popularity has boomed to the point that it has become a social phenomenon, with its own birthday celebrated on Nov. 8.

These humorous programs not only have included Putin parodies and jokes critical of his policies (Garik Kharlamov's hilarious act on Russian TV channels all showing Putin at any given moment comes to mind, among many others), but their live shows have also been attended by Putin and Medvedev themselves, with the latter even appearing as guest on KVN. If one needs any further evidence that subversive humour is doing well, even in post-Soviet Russia: in 2006, on KVN's 45th anniversary, Putin delivered one of the highest awards to KVN President Alexander Maslyakov for running the show successfully for so many years.

One would be hard-pressed to find this reported in the American media. While there have been recent reports of a resurgence of political humour in the Western press and online blogs, the truth is, it never really stopped. Simply, reporting on it probably didn't fit the West's favoured and strategic "Scary Putin — Bad Russia" line.

Many Western commentators have also been clamouring for reforms in Russia, warning that should Putin in his third term fail to implement serious legislative and economic changes, the whole country will be down on a sure-death spiral. What these commentaries and predictions fail to acknowledge is that there have been plenty of reforms in Russia, for a long time already: long, complex, and painful reforms in the tax, banking and other legislative systems, to name but a few. Admittedly — and this is where the misconception lies — Russia has been reforming in its own way (not necessarily the way the West wants), and it has been doing so in its current context of corruption, nevertheless.

Among some of these commentators' proposals for remedying Russia's ills and helping it steer its ship into a more successful future is decentralization of power and redistribution to local authorities throughout the country. Such a proposal can be applauded: it is indeed key to many, if not most of Russia's problems. Although hoping for Putin in his new Presidency to step in that direction is wishful thinking, as the policy for much of his previous presidential and ministerial terms in most areas, seems to have been geared precisely the other way, with regional governors being gradually stripped from their say and influence through new election — and other laws, and Moscow accumulating more power in its hands.

If decentralization were to ever happen in Russia, it won't be while Putin is around (in whatever form — President, Prime Minister, or other).

Other forecasts by American and Western media point to a period of uncertainty under Putin's soon-to-be third Presidency — especially if he doesn't reform. But I beg to differ: if there is one thing he has proved to be able to deliver, it's stability — of the Soviet kind, but stability nevertheless. This is what the people crave, and the reason behind his popularity with much of the population. Recent reports of his declining support among his people in fact refers to the poorer and older layers of society, who may indeed be dissatisfied with his policies precisely because they are hankering for more stability and are nostalgic about the "good old" stable days of the Soviet system. This is typical of the elderly — precisely the category that has most turned its back on Putin in recent statistics. In other words they want more of the old order — a little detail omitted by the pro-West media, all too happy to report on Putin's declining power.

On top and in control

Will Putin return in 2018?

Despite the predictions of a diminished Putin and a shaky Russia in the near future, Putin seems to be fine and to be defying those very predictions. He has certainly demonstrated that he can maintain himself at the top of a gigantic country through turbulent times and difficulties, and has proved to be a master engineer of his own destiny. He is now ready to start on the final phase of his craftily concocted comeback — or perhaps not so final should he decide to run again in 2018, which is very possible, even likely.

Of course, a "strong" Russia in the Western sense needs an entirely different formula: one based on the rule of law, ethics, and respect for human rights, to cite just a few of the essentials. And it is here that the emerging activism of the middle class comes in. But if we assess Putin more objectively than Western observers have tended to do, then the description above still applies.

If this picture looks too gloomy, one may find comfort in the certainty that there will be change in Russia — after Putin.

All in all, I may have sounded overly pessimistic — and I have certainly thrown a bucket of cold water on the West-supported pro-democratic mood and efforts. But if we want to instigate change, it helps to acknowledge where we are with a cool head and face the reality of the difficulties, not deny them, as the U.S. and other foreign media have been doing through biases, misinformation, and embellishments in news reports. American and Western news organizations and independent journalists, I am looking at you, not so much at Putin and the Kremlin, whose tactics are crystal clear by now.

To be followed in 2018. Until then, Russians of all classes and means should make sure they don't hibernate, despite conductive conditions of déjà-vu in their political landscape. But the recent protests and growing civic awareness and action are certainly proof that they will not.

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