

Sticking power

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Gleb Pavlovsky

GENIAL'NAYA VLAST'! SLOVAR'
ABSTRAKTSII KREMLYA
118pp. Moscow: Evropa. Paperback.
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Masha Gessen

THE MAN WITHOUT A FACE
The unlikely rise of Vladimir Putin
314pp. Granta Books. £20.
978 1 84708 149 0
US: Riverhead. \$29.95.
978 1 59448 842 9

Angus Roxburgh

THE STRONGMAN
Vladimir Putin and the struggle for Russia
352pp. I. B. Tauris. £20 (US \$28).
978 1 78076 016 2

Sean P. Roberts

PUTIN'S UNITED RUSSIA PARTY
240pp. Routledge. £90 (US \$155).
978 0 415 66902 3

Allen C. Lynch

VLADIMIR PUTIN AND RUSSIAN
STATECRAFT
184pp. Fotomac. £19.50 (US \$24).
978 1 59797 298 7

Vladimir Putin announced to the Russian people in September 2011 that he had decided to be their president again, for a third term. Insulted by his presumption, as well as the now openly admitted spuriousness of Dmitry Medvedev's four-year presidential interlude, much of educated Russia seethed. In elections to the Duma on December 4, United Russia, the regime's distributor of spoils, dropped seventy-seven seats, from 315 to 238 (out of 450), despite recourse to brazen fraud. The latter, readily captured by smartphones, spurred public protests on December 10, followed by further marches on December 24 and on February 4 of this year, as Russians, despite bitter frosts, turned out across the country in ever-larger numbers, exceeding 100,000 in Moscow. In fact, demonstrations, strikes and railway blockades in Russia have been far more prevalent than generally appreciated, as Graeme B. Robertson demonstrated in *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes: Managing dissent in post-communist Russia* (2010), using daily briefings dispatched by security officials to the central interior ministry. Better known is the circumstance that Russia has some 50 million internet users, and numerous sites have long taken aim at Putin, corruption and misrule.

Still, the Moscow eruptions shocked not just the complacent regime but also the protesters, who began to carry banners such as "Mubarak, Gaddafi, Putin". A Mubarak scenario (a leader's forced resignation) differs from a Gaddafi one (civil war and state collapse), of course, and neither prospect appears in the offing. What is certain is that Russia is at an impasse, and has been since 2007, when Putin himself began hectoring the country about the imperative to modernize.

Boris Yeltsin, too, was once wildly popular. But as early as 1993, the reported "yes" vote for his ham-handed "presidential" constitution was inflated by Yeltsin's own pen, according to his former press secretary. Yeltsin's re-election campaign in 1996 mobilized state coffers, a near-monopoly of television, and scare tactics about a possible return to Communism, while concealing from voters a heart attack the candidate suffered while campaigning. (Yeltsin spent much of his second term in hospital, referred to as his "dacha".) Putin's own experience in 1990s St Petersburg had shown him how Russian elections were won (or lost, as in his patron's case): with smear campaigns drawing on the state budget and media, fake supporters to discredit candidates, and other toxic tricks. By 1998, colossal property theft, mass impoverishment, regional flouting of the federal constitution, contract murders, separatism, terrorism, self-serving oligarchs controlling the airwaves, and foreign diktat had culminated in financial and psychological default. Yeltsin had the decency to apologize when he stepped down early on New Year's Eve, 1999, and named the little-known Putin as his successor. In effect, Putin will also succeed in naming his heir – the same person Yeltsin picked.

This one-man capture of the State has

stood out as utterly singular in writings on Russia. Throw in Putin's KGB background and all the lingering emotions and politics of the Cold War, and Russia's ostensible singularity becomes magnified. But the world knows myriad examples of personal rule, caudillos, juntas, in countries small and large. Did not Indonesia's Suharto appoint

senior military officers, equivalent to Putin's KGB types, to civilian posts, whence they enriched themselves in the name of sovereignty and state security? Is not today's Georgia under Mikheil Saakashvili essentially a one-man regime under which a tiny clique of associates holds sway over the executive, parliament and main national television channels, with a constitution altered by fiat and an opposition chased from the streets with truncheons? We would do well to understand that such regimes are often feeble, even before they reveal themselves to be so, and yet they are not so easily dislodged. They wield numerous instruments – tax police, courts, buy-offs – that are useful only for certain tasks, like holding on to power. Stalin excepted, the more leaders in Russia have pushed for a "strong state", the more they end up producing weak personal rule and institutional mush. In the end, whether the current Russian regime falls or survives, the colossal modernization challenge will persist.

Russia's inventive electoral machinations were immortalized in Andrew Wilson's *Virtual Politics: Faking democracy in the post-Soviet world* (2005), still one of the best books in the field. Now, one of Wilson's colourful subjects, Gleb Pavlovsky, an adviser whom the Kremlin recently threw under the political bus, has written a biting assessment of the regime he long served. *Genial'naya vlast'! Slovar' abstraktsii Kremlya* (The Genius of Power! A dictionary of the Kremlin's abstractions) takes the form of a mock imitation of regime insider-thinking, with stentorian nonsense followed by © in the text. Pavlovsky aims to settle scores with the still more recently demoted arch-manipulator Vladislav Surkov, whose most famous coinage is "sovereign democracy". Pav-

lovsky argues that Russia, obviously no democracy, is also not sovereign. Rather, its system depends entirely on the global economy, a variable Russia cannot control. True, Pavlovsky deems Alexei Kudrin, until last year the long-serving Finance Minister, the "Economic Surkov" for having pre-empted economic risks to the system with the oil-money stabilization fund. Pavlovsky adds, in a further twist of the knife, that in contrast to the administrative "vertical" of Surkov "the budgetary-financial vertical of Kudrin has been built and is functioning". Many other sobering arguments are voiced: that the system throws up "simulated dangers – revolution, putsches, civil war. The simulators are tolerated and sometimes paid"; and that "everyone has an interest in the current system – and everyone is disloyal to it! Everyone works as provocateurs of conflicts, which are settled with bonuses from the pockets of other players". This, we are told, is called "stability".

Pavlovsky draws a telling contrast with Karl Rove's efforts under George W. Bush to create a permanent Republican Party majority, which failed. The "Putin majority", he explains, encompasses people on the state budget (such as pensioners), the working class, state functionaries and the security services, and women. In other words, those who bore the burdens of the Yeltsin "reforms", the losers of the 1990s, became the winners of the 2000s. The majority holds, provided the state budget can continue to find the largesse for its outlays, and the people continue to stay out of politics. But now? If the election of 2000 institutionalized the Putin majority, Pavlovsky concludes, the election of 2012 will institutionalize the "permanent insulted minority".

Masha Gessen, in *The Man Without a Face: The unlikely rise of Vladimir Putin*, follows a different tack in exposing the nastiness of the regime and those who greased its path, yet should have known better (she omits Pavlovsky). Born in the Soviet Union, Gessen moved with her family to the United States in 1981, returned to Russia in 1991, at the age of twenty-four, and became a fine magazine writer and author. Here, too, she employs a chatty, *New Yorker*-like style. "I woke up because someone was shaking me", she begins, setting the theme. Gessen, who discloses she has two children and lives with another woman, counts herself a prime beneficiary of the Soviet collapse, which afforded her freedom and the good life of shopping for bathroom fixtures. During the 1990s, she was also robbed, however, and some of her friends were shot dead, which spurs her to controlled anger and the search for someone to blame. Relying on her own reportage, Oleg Blotsky's Russian-language biography of Putin (2001), and interviews with people she tracked down who knew him before he became a national figure – as well as with the talented Paris-based journalist Natalya Gevorkyan (once tipped to record Putin's autobiography), and the avuncular London exile Boris Berezovsky – Gessen denigrates Putin's Soviet-era KGB service. She taunts him for having been assigned to a



Vladimir Putin at Novosibirsk Academic Town Technology Park, February 17, 2012

"backwater of a backwater", then has Putin and his KGB pals secretly instituting a gangster regime already in 1990s St Petersburg, which they subsequently manage to impose on all of Russia. How, one might object, could Putin be such a nonentity and yet take over an entire country? Well, he fooled Berezovsky, the supposed kingmaker who installed him. Just ask Berezovsky.

Gessen shreds the credentials of the former Mayor of St Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak, whom Putin served as deputy, impugning Sobchak for being a megalomaniac and demagogue who played the democrat while engaging with old elites. (Russia's 50,000 self-styled liberals were evidently supposed to pull the chain and flush away the million-strong inherited Soviet nomenklatura.) In 1990s St Petersburg, Gessen writes, the authorities bugged and beat journalists. They cut deals and pocketed the money without delivering the goods. They threw sulphuric acid in opponents' faces. And then they came to Moscow – where, presumably, none of this was happening. Russia had democracy everywhere Putin was not.

There is more. When the voluble Sobchak inconveniently recalled Putin's role differently from the emerging official line, he was, Gessen implies, murdered by poisoning. She piles up the suspicious corpses, recounting the death by polonium radiation of Alexander Litvinenko in London and the murders of the investigative journalists Yuri Shechekochikhin and Anna Politkovskaya, among others. Gessen's friends fear she may be next. She is right that the regime shrinks from no act or method, but proving matters is not simple. In her telling, the deadly terrorist siege of a Moscow theatre turns out to have been a convoluted set-up; and the fatal storming of a school held hostage in Beslan two years later was unnecessary (Putin could have acceded to the terrorists' demands). Tarring Putin, rather than just his associates, with corruption, she recounts the story of his supposed \$1 billion dacha complex on the Black Sea, invoking the notion of pleonexia (an "insatiable desire to have what rightfully belongs to others"). Conversely, she tells us that Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the jailed tycoon, "invested money and energy in constructing a new political system". She offers a similarly one-sided account of the destruction of Vladimir Gusinsky's empire ("The day the media died"), where she used to work. Repeatedly, she scolds the *New York Times* for its allegedly naive response to these events. Above all, she frog-marches Putin's facilitators before her interviewer's court. Berezovsky, we hear, rues the day he ever helped him. Andrei Illarionov, who worked as Putin's top economic adviser, rues the day. William Browder, who applauded Khodorkovsky's arrest before his own investment fund was evacuated under duress, rues the day. Gessen derides her peers for being taken in by Medvedev's talk of modernization ("The intelligentsia ate it up"), then lets on that her recent boss, the ultra-rich Mikhail Prokhorov, a permitted presidential candidate, "just might topple the system".

Briefly, Gessen's book slips out of its trance. When Russia's giant *Kursk* submarine blew itself up and sank, she writes, Putin, "a hundred days after becoming presi-

dent . . . realized that he now bore responsibility for the entire crumbling edifice of a former superpower". Once, she acknowledges that a governance "problem Putin was trying to address . . . was real".

A far cry from the conspiracy theories of *The Man Without a Face* is *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the struggle for Russia*, a mostly chronological retelling of the past twelve years by Angus Roxburgh, an old Russia hand. He takes us behind the curtain at the Kremlin press section, which he formally advised, and shows it pitifully incapable of grasping its image-making challenges. He is at his best in a chapter on fraught Georgian–Russian relations, capturing the culpability on all sides. Often, however, *The Strongman* – a tie-in to a television series – devolves into analysis by access. For example, Roxburgh narrates the Orange Revolution in Kiev in 2004, but he appears innocent of Chris Chivers's breakthrough reportage, in real time, on the refusal to crack down by the SBU (successor in Ukraine to the KGB). Instead, we get Leonid Kuchma's self-serving post-facto mendacities – because Roxburgh interviewed him. Another example: in 2009, the newly installed President Medvedev received the Editor of one of Russia's few real newspapers, owned by Mikhail Gorbachev and Alexander Lebedev, after another of its correspondents was executed. "To feel the significance of this, you would have to hear – as I have done – members of Putin's team fulminating against the newspaper", Roxburgh writes. "I have heard the prime minister's men use obscene language about it, and they told me Putin feels the same way." Actually, we "felt the significance" even without being privy to the swearing. Like many Westerners, Roxburgh scolds

Westerners for assuming "Russia was just a Western country waiting to be freed". Then he indulges his own disappointment, admitting he did not foresee post-Soviet Russia would turn out this way in the space of twenty years. He concludes that Russians have not yet had a leader who provides both stability and democracy, as if those things came primarily from a leader.

Journalists over-emphasize immediacy and personality; political scientists usually the reverse. But *Putin's United Russia Party*, by Sean P. Roberts, draws on eighty-five interviews in Moscow in 2007, thirty-three of them with "experts, including several journalists". The unironic author is at pains to disguise the fact that his book is not a work of science but of local ethnography, and focuses on a fixed point in time. His fieldwork, however, yields choice quotes from Russian analysts. Sergey Markov succinctly observes of United Russia, "It's not a party. How to make real parties, nobody knows". Georgy Satarov tells him, "I don't think the power vertical is very effective and it's getting less and less effective" – a statement, to repeat, of 2007. Accumulating these remarks, while making passing allusions to other systems, Roberts indicates that United Russia is not a well-institutionalized one-party system such as Mexico's former PRI. United Russia tirelessly collects money from criminal businesses, which pay for state intervention on their behalf. Roberts also shows, however, that United Russia does some good. One interviewee describes an association of parents with disabled children whose 600 families conceived worthy programme ideas but were too poor to realize them, until United Russia showed up to fund them. "All we needed to do in return", a woman explains, "was just to say it was United Russia's project." On balance, Roberts makes us appreciate that the Russian political system, as observed five

years ago, hardly constituted the machine that supporters and enemies alike imagined. This is the point, however, at which we could have used some political science to elucidate the gulf between power and authority. There cannot be a genuinely strong state with a deliberately demobilized, weak society. Putin's regime has the power to rip off and coerce individuals, but it cannot ensure that its programmes are implemented and its laws obeyed.

This brings us to *Vladimir Putin and Russian Statecraft*, the pick of the batch, by the American academic Allen C. Lynch. Lynch offers an economical and incisive, if at times credulous, synopsis of Putin's efforts to come to grips with Russia's place in the world, drawing on the many excellent works on Putin in Russian and especially German. Lynch argues that his occupancy of a series of key posts – among them, head of the presidential administration in charge of investigating corruption, and head of the decayed successor to the KGB – taught Putin that the Russian state under Yeltsin was a fiction. Putin also learned the full details of the oligarchs' run of the house. Lynch observes that a genuine election in 2000 might have produced a far less loyal successor who could have exposed, and prosecuted, the criminal self-dealing and incompetence of Yeltsin's democracy. During his first term as President, Putin defended Russian state interests and often made Solomonic decisions: outrageous corruption and malfeasance were curbed without utopian efforts to eliminate either. Putin did eliminate the humiliating Bill and Boris "summits" and the era of IMF missious parachuting into Moscow to dictate Russian personnel appointments. But if Putin helped restore the Russian state, Lynch observes, it came at a high price.

After twelve years at the pinnacle of power, with twelve more in prospect, Putin remains at a loss as to how to move Russia to the next level, towards a version of the modernity he rightly says the country needs. As for the man-boy Medvedev, even now he continues his enervating verbiage. "The old model, which faithfully and truly served our state in recent years, and did not serve it badly, and which we all defended – it has exhausted itself", he remarked on December 17. Why have these endless calls for modernization not been answered? Masha Gessen has the simplest response: it was mostly a ruse. Angus Roxburgh's explanation comes via a Russian businessman, who tells him that corruption "is the entire system – the political system, the business establishment, the police, the judiciary, the government, from top to bottom, all intertwined and inseparable". Allen Lynch, too, singles out structural impediments, as well as accumulated Soviet rot and geopolitical constraints, some self-imposed. Russia wants to deal with the West and China from a position of equality, but it cannot; Russia wants to be a global power centre in its own right, the hub of a Eurasian Union, but it is not. Pavlovsky suggests another piece of the answer, on top of the exigencies of the global economy: Putin has exposed himself as ever more cocky and vindictive, and bereft of the political agility of his first term, refusing all concessions and unable to revive a sense of a future. Russia deserves better, but is in line for more of the same.

For Ruthie Rogers in Venice

(Bo Rogers died in November 2011, aged twenty-seven)

Shoulders to cry on,
these mooring posts,
trios leaning together,
supporting each other:
in grief and inconsolable.

Mooring posts tapering to blunt black
like a lost child's lost crayons.

The endless wash
of salt water.
See-through, threadbare, worn,

these great fogs like ghosts
in slow flight from some slaughter.

The hoarse cries of fog-horns,
lost in their loss,
with no way back,

and the world gone white
in a single night.

CRAIG RAINE