Sticking power

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Gleh Pavlovsky

GENIAL' MAYA VLADST SLOVAR' ABRAKSTASH KREMILY
118pp. Moscow: Evropa. Paperback. 978 5 9739 0207 0

Masha Gessen

THE MAN WITHOUT A FACE
The unlikely rise of Vladimir Putin
314pp. Granta Books. £20. 978 1 84708 149 0

Angus Roxburgh

THE STRONOMAN
Vladimir Putin and the struggle for Russia

Sean P. Roberts

PUTIN'S UNITED RUSSIA PARTY
240pp. Riverhead. $29.95. 978 0 399 53922 0

Allen C. Lynch

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

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

Vladimir Putin announced to the Russian people in September 2011 that he had decided to be his president again, for a third term. Insulted by his presumption, as well as by the now openly admitted aspirations 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 bribery 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 maire.

Still, the Moscow eruptions shocked not just the compliant regime but 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 sate 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 up-valuation, regional floating of the federal constitution, contract murders, separatism, terrorism, self-serving oligarchs controlling the airwaves, and foreign dictat 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 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 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 trombones? 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 role and institutional mesh. 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 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' abrakstash Kremlya (The Genius of Power! A dictionary of the Kremlin's abstractions) takes the form of a mock imitation of regime insider-thanking, with stentorian nonsense followed by © in the text. Pavlovsky aims to settle scores with the still recently demoted arch-manipulator Vladimir Surkov, whose most famous coinage is "sovereign democracy". Pavlovsky 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 preempted 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 sobereating arguments are voiced: that the system throws up "simulated dangers - revolution, patches, civil war. The simulators are tolerated and sometimes paid"; and that "everyone has an interest in the current system - and everyone is loyal 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, Putinovskly concludes, the election of 2012 will institutionalize the "permanent insulated minority".

Masha Gessen, 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 claims Pavlovsky is "the avuncular journalist" who bore the burdems of the Soviet-era KGB service). 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 Gervokyan (once tipped to record Putin's autobiography), and the avuncular London exile Boris Berезovsky - Gessen delineates Putin's Soviet-era KGB service. She hunts him up for having been assigned to a
POLITICAL

For Ruthie Rogers in Venice

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

Shoulders to cry on, these mourning mothers, trots learning together, supporting each other: in grief and incoherent.

Mourning posts tapering to blunt black like a lost child’s lost crayons.

The endless wash of salt water.

See-through, threadbare, worn, these great fog-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 RANE