

On the Qualities of Russian Teflon

By Kadri Liik

As anyone familiar with kitchenware knows, after years of use Teflon tends to wear off. And that seems to be what has happened to Russia's former and would-be president, Vladimir Putin. November 20, when he was booed at a Moscow stadium, may have signified the end of an era. Putin's genuine popularity has been the cornerstone of the Russian political system – the facilitating factor – ever since late 1999. With that popularity eroding, the system will find it increasingly difficult to continue functioning the way it used to, as its potential to adapt and change remains questionable.

Who is to blame?

It could be said that the people are to blame: having offered their leaders indiscriminate support for nearly 12 years, they have now changed their minds and have decided that they do not like the power elite any more. The discontent had been mounting for months, but it escalated drastically after September 24, when President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin announced their planned job swap. While the news itself was not unexpected, the paternalistic style of its presentation seems to have backfired. On that day Medvedev effectively became a political nonentity – his name all but disappeared from the list of attractive presidential candidates¹ and his attempts to regain the reputation of a serious politician have been unsuccessful.

For Putin and the party in power, United Russia, ratings still look solid: at the parliamentary elections on December 4, United Russia is likely to gain 53% of the vote² (down from 64% at the 2007 elections) and 31% would elect Putin as president if elections were held now (compared to 8% who support his nearest challenger, Communist Gennady Zyuganov).³ Putin's approval rating is still over 60% – down from over 80%, which has been its peak, but the figure is still high by any country's standards.

However, what makes the situation ominous is not the fall in the quantity, but rather in the quality of support. "People used to support the current authorities because they had hopes

¹ According to the polls conducted by the Levada-Center, the percentage of people who wanted Medvedev as president (based on their answers to an open question: "If the elections took place next Sunday, who would you vote for?") dropped from 18% in July to 7% in November 2011. The respective figures for Putin were 23% and 31% (<http://www.levada.ru/25-11-2011/vybory-prezidenta>).

² Irina Novikova, "Bolshe mest u oppozitsii," *Vedomosti*, 28.11.2011 (http://www.vedomosti.ru/newspaper/article/271822/bolshe_mest_u_oppozicii).

³ <http://www.levada.ru/25-11-2011/vybory-prezidenta>.

(associated with them); now they support them because of a lack of alternatives,” says Alexey Makarkin, an analyst at the Centre of Political Technologies in Moscow.⁴ “The sacralisation of power has disappeared.”

Many experts have ascribed the recently rising mood of protest to the spread of the Internet (used now by more than 50 million Russians) and social networks. This explanation is only partly true: the digital world has served as a means for exchanging views critical of the Kremlin, but this has only been possible because suddenly – for the first time in the 21st century – criticism is again in demand in Russian society.

For a full decade, Putin’s popularity has rested on the notion that he saved the Russians from the economic collapse and the messy politics of the 1990s. In return for stability and income growth, stemming from rising oil prices, he was forgiven practically everything. But now the 1990s are no longer used as a reference point. “People have become accustomed to a stable life, but the feeling of emptiness is growing,” says Boris Dubin, a sociologist at the Levada Centre. “There is some sadness and tiredness.”⁵

The fear of instability – a permanent feature of the public sphere during the last decade and still shared as late as in May 2011 by both the rulers and the ruled – is becoming fragmented. “Increasing numbers of people say that they would not mind temporary instability for the sake of changes,” claims Mikhail Dmitriev, President of the Centre for Strategic Research in Moscow.⁶

People are becoming less ideological and more interested in local and real-life issues. The increasingly prominent middle class that only recently ensured a strong support base for the current leadership is becoming disillusioned with the political system’s ability – or rather its inability – to fulfil their demands, which include respect for equality before the law; control of arbitrary behaviour by civil servants and corruption; affordability and accessibility of basic services, such as health care and education; increased social mobility. As their needs are not being met in Russia, many people emigrate – Russia is annually losing 80,000–100,000 to emigration. Talks about leaving have noticeably intensified after the Putin-Medvedev announcement on September 24.

And discontent is not only constrained to anti-Kremlin liberals or the well-off Internet-savvy middle class in Moscow – it has infected almost every layer of society. Lower classes envy the middle class. Provinces envy Moscow. Pensioners feel their income does not keep up with rising prices (which may seem paradoxical, given that pensions have actually been growing even with current inflation rates).⁷ Nationalists have their own complaints to those who hold and execute power...

Even the political elites are not happy: the so-called intra-system liberals who had harboured great career hopes in connection with Medvedev’s second term are now, understandably, disappointed. Medvedev’s promise to form a ‘big government’, which might, in theory, include

⁴ ICDS interview with Alexey Makarkin on 22.11.2011.

⁵ ICDS interview with Boris Dubin on 23.11.2011.

⁶ ICDS interview with Mikhail Dmitriev on 24.11.2011

⁷ According to the Center for Strategic Research.

some of these people, did not do much to improve the situation. But, above all, the so-called *siloviki* – the people from ‘power ministries’ and special services, forming Putin’s most loyal support group and recruitment pool – no longer retain complete unanimity, instead they are mired in different types of conflicts that have to do with career issues and inter-institutional feuds.⁸

What is to be done?

Putin’s genuine popularity enabled Russia’s ‘manipulated democracy’ to run smoothly: his political figure made it possible to hold elections and to always get the desired results, mostly without excessive deliberate falsification. With that popularity eroding, the system should modify itself and find new methods of operation, but even if it manages to do so, the question remains whether or not it will be ‘too little, too late’. Or, to put it differently, will Russia find an evolutionary way out of the current dead end or will it make a sudden break, more reminiscent of a revolution?

Already in summer 2011, Mikhail Dmitriev from the Centre for Strategic Research noted that this “rupture in the public mood has occurred too close to the elections. Russian society has outgrown the existing political system, but it is too late to adapt the system before the elections.”⁹ Indeed, looking back, there were various missed opportunities for preventing the current upsurge in popular protest. For example, the so-called extra-systemic liberals and other non-Kremlin controlled groups could have been allowed to run at the Duma elections in order to make the political landscape more heterogeneous; and certainly the stylistics of the message about the planned job swap at the top – if not the message itself – could have been reconsidered.

After the booing incident on November 20, Putin has cancelled several long-planned public appearances, which suggests that he has only now become aware of his popularity plummeting. His traditional televised call-in show was postponed until after the elections on December 4. It remains to be seen whether or not he will manage to find a new style of communication with the people and thereby halt the downward spiral, but there are reasons for scepticism. Politicians tend to rely on strategies that have worked for them and it cannot be easy to effect a rapid transformation after 12 years of success.

Putin seems to have lost his intuition, his sense of the public mood. The famous spin-doctors who have formerly developed successful PR strategies for the Kremlin have now been mostly sidelined for whatever reasons.¹⁰ Imitations of change – such as the possible dumping of United Russia and relying on the National Front in the future, an option that causes speculation in Moscow – may not work because as a result of overexploitation, these forms of mimicry are

⁸ See Andrey Soldatov, “Treti srok i spetssluzhby,” *Ezhednevny Zhurnal*, 3.10.2011 (<http://www.ej.ru/?a=note&id=11374>).

⁹ Mikhail Dmitriev, “Politicheskaya sistema: vse nachinayetsya posle vyborov,” *Vedomosti*, 11.07.2011 (http://www.csr.ru/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=326%3A2011-07-11-07-22-52&catid=39%3A2009-0).

¹⁰ ICDS interview with Andrey Soldatov, 22.11.2011.

becoming devalued. Russian society's once all but irrational love for Putin may turn into an equally irrational hate.

The political system created by Putin may now backfire on him. The fact that intermediate levels of power have lost their independence, manifest in the abolition of gubernatorial elections, means that the demands and accusations of the population are addressed directly to the top. The absence of vigorous independent political parties means that society finds it hard to express its mood of protest via elections and channels it instead either into ironic jokes on the Internet or, worse, street riots. The opportunistic political elite that made governing so easy when the position of the authorities was firm may defect overnight once it turns weak – as was demonstrated by the fate of Yuri Luzhkov, Moscow's long-term mayor.

Will you be a third?

Several Moscow analysts agree that bringing a fresh face to the top could give the system a new lease of life, at least for some time. Boris Yeltsin used to be a master of such moves: by elevating Yevgeny Primakov to the position of prime minister, he managed to stabilise the situation and possibly save his regime after one of the most serious political crises in his unpopular years – the default of 1998.

But it will be difficult for Putin to copy him. Popularity is a valuable commodity in election campaigns; and replacing Medvedev with someone else might improve Putin's ratings, but this cannot be done until May when Medvedev will vacate the seat in the Kremlin – unless, of course, Medvedev can be persuaded to resign from the Kremlin after the Duma elections and to become the Duma speaker, in which case Putin would become acting president and the seat of prime minister would be vacant for a newcomer.

Still, popular newcomers would be hard to come by – during the last 12 years, the political system has been expelling rather than attracting strong personalities. Picking a suitable person would be even more complicated: a fiercely independent candidate would start challenging the system; an excessively dependent one would not have the desired effect.

Some analysts go as far as to speculate about the possibility of replacing Putin. According to Andrey Piontkovsky, an independent analyst, the grouping behind Putin has started to doubt whether he continues to serve their interests, but they lack a mechanism for replacing him: "In that sense the Soviet system was more flexible – the Politburo gathered and removed Khrushchev when he had become a liability."¹¹ Putin's 'informal politburo', however, in whatever shape it exists, is still more likely to end up rallying around him, regardless of the misgivings.

Of course, restoring the approval of the people for the political system and its leaders is not the only way forward. It is also possible to keep a 'managed democracy' going with an unpopular leader, as Boris Yeltsin's regime demonstrated. But that would require investing considerable energy and resources in political bargaining that could no longer be done from the position of

¹¹ ICDS interview with Andrey Piontkovsky on 23.11.2011.

absolute power, as the current leaders are used to. However, this would not be a sustainable arrangement in any case.

One could also resort to violence, fear and completely bogus elections – as does the leader of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenka – or even abandon the facade of democracy altogether. But while this cannot be excluded completely, it would be at odds both with Russia's global ambitions and, more importantly, with its ruling class's personal lifestyle and survival strategy, in which the West, its assets and bank accounts occupy an important place.

Which year is it?

The liberals in Moscow are quite excited – finally the ice seems to be moving! Intellectuals and experts entertain themselves by debating different scenarios using historical parallels. Are we in the year 1916? Or 1917? Late 1980s? 1991? 1998?

Still, everyone acknowledges that a positive outcome does not exactly loom on the horizon. Even if very different social groups are united in their disapproval of the tandem and the party in power, their visions for future are too diverse, even antagonistic. Civil society in Russia is not well organised and the domestic political arena, barren like a desert, has not given birth to any new political leaders (although the latter could emerge quickly if the conditions become conducive to growth).

The future will be shaped by many unknowns. Will the protest mood in society escalate after the Duma elections (given the possibility of falsifications)? Will Putin and his circle manage to calm the situation or will they panic and make mistakes? Will they resort to the use of force? Once the election results have been secured, how will they conduct the painful, but unavoidable reforms, such as the overhaul of the pension system? How high will the oil prices be? (To retain a balanced state budget, Russia needs them to be on average over 108 dollars a barrel this year and 116 dollars a barrel in 2012.) Finally, if there are explosive events in the North Caucasus or in Moscow connected with the North Caucasus, the developments could take an extremely dangerous turn.

The predictions of Russia-watchers range from one extreme to the other. James Sherr, a Chatham House expert who offers penetrating insights into Russia, predicted that the system would always find ways to adapt and survive, unless a dramatic change in external circumstances made it impossible.¹² In Russia, the consensus seems to be that Putin is not facing 12 years of calm leadership. Even the most conservative estimates predict that changes will come at least between the 6th and the 10th years.¹³ But given the recent pace of radicalisation, an explosive event could also occur much earlier and unexpectedly. Andrey Piontkovsky recalls a speech given by Vladimir Lenin to Swiss social democrats in Zurich in February 1917: "Revolution will certainly come, but my eyes will not see it," Lenin said. 'The next generation might be able to participate in it.' And then he went home and received a telegram that informed him of the riots in Saint Petersburg."¹⁴

¹² James Sherr at the Riga Conference on 17.09.2011.

¹³ ICDS interview with Boris Dubin on 23.11.2011.

¹⁴ ICDS interview with Andrey Piontkovsky on 23.11. 2011.

It is also unclear who will benefit from time, if the tandem manages to carry out the elections as planned and the political system continues functioning along the usual lines for a little while longer – for the time being, this is still probably the most likely scenario. On the one hand, the Russian middle class's demands for the future increasingly coincide with those of their peers in the West. Russian civil society is developing, although slowly and with difficulties. "The goal of my work is to help society to self-organise and to create a network of NGOs, not necessarily political ones – any civic activism is good – so that by the time a change comes, there will be structures that will be ready to take over," says Oleg Kozlovsky, a civil society activist.¹⁵

On the other hand, the simmering violence in the North Caucasus and its spillover to the rest of Russia, together with grievances caused by corruption and arbitrary decision-making by officials, continue to feed aggressive and xenophobic feelings among suitably disposed population groups. If they become the driving force behind the changes, the situation could take a nasty turn.

Experts who have worked on more detailed scenarios, such as Georgy Satarov from INDEM Foundation¹⁶ and Mikhail Dmitriev from the Centre for Strategic Research, believe that clashes between the authorities and enraged crowds are likely to occur – either soon or after some years of inertial perpetuation of the current situation. Boris Dubin from the Levada-Center is doubtful over the ability of the poverty-stricken lower class to mobilise itself and to take to the streets, but he does not exclude the possibility of clashes between the authorities and nationalist groups.¹⁷

What can the West do?

Russian politics is destined to run its course and there is very little the West could do to influence it. In addition, there are not many ways to prepare for what is coming. Still, a few ideas can be suggested.

Normal international communication should be continued with Russian leaders, but we should avoid the trap we have fallen into in the past – that is our instinct to support the president as the only guarantor of stability in Russia. This would be wrong for many reasons. First, Western support is actually of no help to a Russian leader. We are outsiders; the Russians want to decide their own affairs among themselves. Second, even if Putin's rule may be the best hope for stability at the moment, the continuation of a stagnant system in a long-term perspective may damage the prospects for a positive aftermath. Third, we may have reached the stage where excessive support for Putin may discredit the West in the eyes of more progressive Russians.

In the past, when the Kremlin has been in trouble, it has sought scapegoats in the form of 'enemy figures' abroad, with NATO, the US and Russia's democratic neighbouring countries as the preferred targets. In this election cycle, there is still no sign of that (the few random

¹⁵ ICDS interview with Oleg Kozlovsky on 22.11.2011.

¹⁶ <http://www.indem.ru/en/index.shtml>

¹⁷ ICDS interview with Boris Dubin on 23.11.2011.

statements uttered do not amount to a full-scale campaign), but should any occur, the West should refuse to go along with Moscow and should tell it politely but firmly to address the real problems that the nation is facing.

If the Kremlin resorts to violence in the domestic arena, the West must condemn it unambiguously and quickly. We can remind Moscow, among other things, that the use of force is counterproductive to its ambitions to host the Olympic Games and the World Cup in football. (But if the Kremlin is fighting a nationalist mutiny, it will admittedly be much harder to define the right reaction...)

On the positive side, we should mobilise our energy and ingenuity to help Russian civil society to self-organise, develop and prosper. A strong and well-structured civil society is the best guarantee for long-term stability in Russia. Brainstorming is due on how best to do it, given the fact that Western money may get Russian organisations into trouble and may also attract unholy applicants. Still, there are thousands of people in Russia who devote their time and energy on saving nature, on heritage protection and on helping others. The sense of civic responsibility demonstrated by them is the very force on which Russia can build its stable and possibly also democratic future.