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Gleb Pavlovsky

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118pp. Moscow: Evropa. Paperback. 978-5-9739-0207-0

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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 rapacity of Dmitry Medvedev's four-year presidency, 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 compliant regime but also the protestors, who began to carry banners such as "At last, Gaddafis are free!" (Gaddafio (a leader's forced resignation) differs from a Gaddafi (civil war and state collapse)). Of course, and neither prospect appears in the offing. What is certain is that Russia is an impasse, and has been since 2007, when Putin himself began hectoring the country about "democracy". Boris Yeltsin, too, was once wildly popular. But as early as 1993, the reported "yes" vote for his ham-handed "presidential" constitutional infatuation 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 both 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, colossai property theft, mass impoverishment, regional flooding 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 as with the talented Paris-based journalist Natalya Gorbanevskaya, who was once tipped to record Putin's autobiography, and the avuncular London exile Boris Berezovsky - Gessen designates Putin's Soviet-era KGB service. She taunts him for having been assigned to a 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 it not today's Georgia under Mikhail 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 blistering assessment of the regime he long served. Genial'naya Vlast': Sovremennyi abstraktii (Genius of Power! A dictionary of the Kremlin's abstractions) takes the form of a mock election. "Mubarak, Gaddafi, Putin". A Mubarak scenario is in the offing. What is certain is that Russia is a Place: The unlikely rise of Vladimir Putin, following a different tack in exposing the nastier, the election of 2012 will institutionalize the Putin majority, Pavlovsky concludes. But now? If the election of 2000 institutionalized 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 "poverty".

Vladimir Putin at Novosibirsk Academic Town Technology Park, February 17, 2012.
For Ruthie Rogers in Venice

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

Shoulders to cry on,
these mourning posts,
trios leaning together,
supporting each other
in grief and insconsiderable.

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