

THE WORLD

In the Days of Reform Fatigue, the Policeman Cometh

RUSSIA

By Gregory Freidin

STANFORD

"The plumber will come," begins a 1980s poem by Dmitry Prigov, "and will smash the toilet; the gasman will break the gas stove; the electrician will do the wiring in. But, behold, the policeman cometh to say to them all: 'Enough of this horsing around—.'" The poem was eerily prescient about the course of reform in Russia from Mikhail S. Gorbachev to Vladimir V. Putin. Was Gorbachev the plumber? Was Boris N. Yeltsin the electrician? Was the demonic magnate Boris A. Berezovsky the gasman? Or was it the other way around? As Russians make their way to their polling stations today to elect their second president, they have no doubt that the policeman is Putin.

Order is what Russian citizens yearn for, and they have, according to polls, invested their hopes in a former intelligence operative, a man of apparent self-discipline but unpretentious in demeanor and looks. What may have been a liability in a politician in the more charismatic times of *perestroika* and post-communist Russia has become in the days of reform fatigue an invaluable asset. Gray is beautiful.

Putin's reputation as a man of law and order stems from his uncompromising stand on Chechnya. The current Russian word for chaos and disorder is *bespredel*, meaning, a state of existing without limits. Putin resolved to put an end to *bespredel* in Chechnya, even at the price of removing restraints on the Russian army. Most of his compatriots are relieved: Here is a man who knows how to set limits.

The question is whether Putin will respect the limits that the country's fledgling constitutional democracy sets on the power of the Russian state. The fact that

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Putin served as a KGB officer should not be considered decisive in a country whose towering reform figures of the last two decades came from the ranks of the party responsible for the Soviet debacle, including the Gulag. Other factors seem far more important.

• *Putin's election mandate.* Putin's margin of victory is expected to be spectacular, which may, paradoxically, signify a diminished mandate, one stemming not from the depth of popular support but from the absence of a credible opponent. With the exception of his position on Chechnya, he has consistently refused to disclose his intentions as president. He thus bears some blame for making the race less of a sport than it ought to have been. Even the support offered Putin—every significant political group or personality in the country has signed on—conceals a serious liability. By filling his handwagon with whomever has been willing to jump on, Putin has cast himself in the image of the proverbial herder of cats. What

can the Agrarian Party, a state-subsidy addict and, until recently, a coalition partner of Russia's dyed-in-the-wool Communists, have in common with the Union of the Rightist forces, monetarists and free-marketers bent on eliminating subsidies and supporting privatization of land?

• *Political base.* Who is Putin counting on? For a man who had never held political office, who made his career in a government bureaucracy and who wishes to reestablish the authority of the state, the answer is: the state bureaucracy, including that branch where Putin began his rise, the state security services. Accordingly, he proposes to raise substantially the salaries of top- and middle-level government officials, thereby increasing their status and making them more immune to pressure and bribes.

Putin's faith in the possibility of reforming one of the world's longest-established corrupt bureaucracies by bureaucratic means gives a clue to his curious occasional dance with the Communist

Party, for example, his support of the speaker of the Duma, Gennady N. Seleznyov, at the expense of his free-market allies. Unlike Yeltsin, Putin has no particular ax to grind against the Communists. Indeed, he cherishes the hope that they will transform themselves into an association along the lines of European social democracy and be respectful of individual property rights. Such a transformation, according to him, should serve to stabilize Russian society and state.

• *The oligarchs.* Putin's stated attitude toward the problem of Russia's massive concentration of wealth is to maintain the status quo while making sure no existing laws are broken. But if Putin's reputation for law and order is to survive, he will have to deal with that problem and the natural monopolies in a way that will satisfy the country's expectations for a level economic playing field.

• *Center and periphery.* Step outside the capital, and you will hear that the most missed attribute of Soviet power in provincial Russia are the limits Moscow used to set on the arbitrary rule of the local bosses. Putin plans to restore some federal controls and support local government, too, which might check the power of the heads of regions.

• *The press and opposition.* Putin's apparent grasp of the importance of checks and balances in relations between the center and the regions is not echoed in his attitudes toward political opposition and a critical press. Russia's public television, ORT, controlled, in effect, by Berezovsky, has unleashed a sickeningly crude attack on the competing media empire of Vladimir A. Gusinsky, NTV, which has been openly anti-war. For example, in a March 23 broadcast, ORT showed Gusinsky's Israeli passport and repeatedly played a clip of him breaking bread with a group of Orthodox rabbis. The video aimed to raise questions about Gusinsky's allegiance to Russia and the legitimacy of his media outlets. Apparently, Putin, who has refused to grant interviews to Gusinsky-owned media because of their criticism of his Chechnya policy, does not seem to be too unhappy.

• *Who is Putin?* The most intriguing as-

pect of the new political terrain is how Putin's personality and outlook will, his reticence notwithstanding, dominate Russia's political culture. The contrast with Yeltsin cannot be more dramatic. Although both came from a humble background, Putin is decidedly a product of urban, modern Russia, indeed of its most Western city and imperial capital, St. Petersburg. It is a telling detail that, while serving as deputy mayor of Leningrad, as it was then called, Putin replaced the obligatory Lenin portrait in his office with one of Peter the Great, the czar who created St. Petersburg.

Yeltsin belonged to the generation of party leaders who were short on education and long on administrative experience. Putin, who has a doctorate in law from Petersburg State University, speaks several languages, including perfect German, and is at home in an intellectual and professional milieu. A graduate of a construction engineering college, Yeltsin never learned to speak clearly; Putin, a true Petersburg, articulates every word. Yeltsin had barely traveled abroad before entering the national political scene. Putin has traveled to, lived in and feels comfortable with the West. Unlike Yeltsin, whose father and grandfather suffered in the purges and collectivization of agriculture under Josef Stalin, and who has firsthand experience of Stalinist repression, Putin insists he was only vaguely aware of the Gulag and managed somehow not to connect it to the organization that recruited him, the KGB. As president, Yeltsin had only a vague sense of how a market economy operates. Putin learned it firsthand both in the West and as the Leningrad official in charge of foreign investment. Yeltsin liked strong drink. Putin, though not a teetotaler, prefers sobriety.

Disciplined and focused, Putin seems to be cut out for a leader attempting a clean sweep. Many a Russian reformer, beginning with Peter the Great, has been unmade by this task, too absorbed, alas, to pay due attention to plumbing, gas and electricity. □