Russian spring: Putin's time may be up

Nicholas Hayes

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This December marks the 20th anniversary of the end of the Soviet Union. Throughout these two decades, Kremlin watchers have waited to spot something sinister slouching toward the Kremlin. We thought it had to be a political monster worthy of the nation that produced Josef Stalin. We missed or simply dismissed the little slouch who has occupied the Kremlin since 2000.

His time may be up.

Last week, from a parliamentary election that cut the majority of Vladimir Putin's United Russia Party from 70 percent to 50 percent to mass demonstrations of tens of thousands in Moscow and cities across the country, Russians dared to tell Putin that they had had enough.

At 60 percent, voter turn-out was low. The evidence of vote tampering and ballot stuffing was outrageous even by Russian standards and also divulged that the Kremlin authorities have not yet understood the power of the new social media. The cry of fraud and demand for a new election came first from a few predictable dissident types. By the end of the week, the last president of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev, and the
Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church called for a repeal of a patently flawed election.

Something is not working for Putin. One problem is obvious: his charm offensive failed. In his first two terms as president from 2000 to 2008, Putin seemed to have taken to heart Machiavelli's advice: Better to be feared than loved.

The marketing of a more stylish and congenial Putin started in 2008 after he left the presidency and assumed the position of prime minister. This re-packaging of his image was his first step in a strategy for the 2012 presidential election.

Some MinnPost readers may recall that I couldn't resist commenting on "the politics of Putin's torso" in the summer 2009 when images of Putin bare-chested and riding a horse bareback flooded the Russian media. The summer also saw a series of "spontaneous" appearances of Putin and Dmitry Medvedev in the Moscow club scene where they sported designer jackets, knocked down a few drinks and flirted with an admiring and short-skirted "devushka" in the crowd.

**Putin as Fats Domino**

A year ago, on Dec. 11, 2010, Putin performed his version of Fats Domino's "Blueberry Hill" before a live audience and the cameras of state-owned and operated Russian Television (RT). The setting was a charity dinner in St. Petersburg. Putin started by playing the tune on the piano and then led the audience singing the song in English. Who would have thought that an ex-KGB agent could do Fats Domino?

The tour de force in the marketing of Putin appeared in the video that advertised vodka named after him — Putinka Vodka. It features images contrasting a Russian version of the male couch potato with the stately presidential Putin while two pop-rock darlings sing "A Man, Like Putin." Here's the song's refrain:

I want a man like Putin,
One like Putin, full of strength,
One like Putin, won't be a drunk,
One like Putin, wouldn't beat me,
One like Putin, won't run away.

Apparently, the song didn't catch on.

Putin was also over-confident and arrogant in his presumption that the Russians had come to accept his view of elections. Elections in Putin's Russia serve to legitimize the image of the regime.

Do Russians believe their elections are rigged? The best answer to the question comes from a Russian
joke that goes back to 2000 and the disputed U.S. presidential election: Did you hear that Bush and Gore agreed to bring in Vladimir Putin to oversee the recount? And guess what? It worked perfectly. It turned out that Putin won the election.

In Putin's Russia, the fix is in long before the votes are cast. Legal harassment and a convoluted registration system keep genuine opposition parties off the ballot. A state-controlled media precedes the election with nightly coverage casting representatives of Putin's United Russia Party in leading roles as responsible statesmen and all other politicians in minor roles as buffoons. United Russia runs a get-out-the-vote drive that would make Illinois' Cook County Democratic machine blush. Factory workers, public employees, school teachers and all of the minions who in one way or another depend on the state for a livelihood know that if their names do not show up on the lists of voters they will most likely not have a job after the election.

The real heroes of the election on Dec. 4 were those 40 percent of the electorate who had the courage not to vote. Any voter foolish enough not to vote for Putin's United Russia Party ends up voting for one of the "opposition" parties. The three that survived the recent election — the Communist Party with 19 percent, the Liberal Democratic Party (a corrupted nationalist party) with 12 percent and a perfectly innocuous liberal Just Russia Party with 13 percent — are puppets of the Kremlin and exist to lend credibility to the fiction of a multiparty system in Russia.

Finally, a little old-fashioned ballot stuffing rounds out the returns, assuring a majority for United Russia and a symbolic minority for the "opposition."

**Crude moves**
The day after the election Putin's first moves were crude. Special police units from the Ministry of Interior — Putin's old pals at the FSB, the successor to the KGB — broke up the three relatively small demonstrations in Moscow, bludgeoned some of the demonstrators and imprisoned others, including Aleksei Navalny, the symbolic leader to today's anti-Putin movement who continues to blog from prison.

(By the way, an old KGB hand, Putin really does believe the explanation he put out Monday that the demonstrations are orchestrated by Hillary Clinton and demonstrators are paid by the U.S. funded Institute for Democracy.)

By Thursday, a calmer, calculating Putin responded with a better move. According to the official news agency ITAR-TASS, Putin "acknowledged the need to conduct a dialogue with those oppositionally minded, and to give them an opportunity to use their constitutional right to demonstrate." The stage was set to turn the mass demonstrations Saturday into a showpiece of Putin's "managed democracy." The city gave the demonstrators a permit. The police behaved. The state-controlled press pretended it was a real press covering the demonstration and even voicing a few dissident opinions.
The younger, more hip Dmitry Medvedev went to Facebook on Sunday to give his spin on the Kremlin's the new talking points. His Facebook page promises that credible cases of election fraud will be investigated. Don't expect the Dec. 4 elections to be overturned.

Perhaps, the results of a few more outrageous cases will be tossed out. A likely candidate is the election in Chechnya where the Kremlin-installed regime of Ramzan Kadyrov played from an old Soviet-era script to give Putin's United Russia Party 99.5 percent of the vote. A bit of an embarrassment for the Kremlin's image, the Chechen vote tally is identical to the vote for the Communist Party in the old Soviet days.

Putin plays his next move today. His supporters will stage their own demonstration in Manezh Square, a prime venue adjacent to the Kremlin. By the time of the next opposition demonstration on Dec. 24, Putin will have cut a deal with a few of his more malleable opponents and gone through the charade of a public dialogue. Pro-Putin demonstrators will compete with the anti-government protestors for public attention and get a little help from the police in their efforts.

The tolerance of another anti-government demonstration is a risk Putin will take to keep up his show of legitimacy while he plots a much tougher course for his own re-election to the presidency in March.

For the past 12 years, Russians appeared to have accepted Putin because, to use a common Russian phrase, "things could be worse." After all, Putin was not another Stalin and Russia's liberals were a synonym for the chaos of the 1990s. Last week at the ballot box and on the streets of Moscow, there were signs that not all Russians have abandoned the dream of 20 years ago. They made it known that many Russians still believe that things could be better.

A Russian Spring just might come with the presidential elections next March.