Comment

The two grand bargains being offered by the 21st-century tsar

Many Russians accept a loss of democracy as long as they prosper. Should we give Putin respect in exchange for gas and oil?

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Think of it as the Sinatra test. On Sunday, assorted liberal, democratic and opposition groups will take on the might of Vladimir Putin in elections for the Moscow city parliament. This should be fertile terrain: the capital city is packed with well-educated, enlightened folk and was once seen as the citadel of Russia's pro-democracy movement. Put another way, and to paraphrase Ol' Blue Eyes, if the opposition can't make it here, they can't make it anywhere.

But they won't make it. You don't need to be a pollster to know that Putin and his United Russia party are on course for a thumping majority on Sunday. Merely travelling around the city, as I have this week, spells it out. It's his party which has grabbed the giant hoardings - along with the national colours and the age-old symbol of the Russian bear - leaving the opposition to stand on freezing street corners, handing out photocopied flyers.

How come Putin, now five years into his presidency, is so dominant? If this was normal politics, you'd say Putin is popular because he has restored national pride, a welcome antidote after the Yeltsin years, when the antics of their wobbly, drunken president embarrassed most Russians; he has made voters believe that Russia can be a great power once more; and, above all, he has presided over a phenomenal economic boom.

That's not just the wealth whose naked visibility is such a shock to someone who last came here in 1988 - when every shop looked like an empty stockroom, when the entire country was painted in the bleakest shade of grey, and when retail activity was confined to buying a slab of frozen margarine claiming to be ice cream. Now the streets heave with Mercs and BMWs; Louis Vuitton and Christian Dior sit directly opposite Lenin's tomb in Red Square; and the casinos of Novi Arbat are lit up in enough throbbing neon to make it the Las Vegas of the east. Sip tea in Cafe Pushkin and you can well believe that Moscow has more dollar billionaires than any other city in the world (36 at last count) or that Russia numbers its millionaires at 88,000.

But it's not just the oligarchs with their Lamborghinis who have got richer. The national GDP has more than tripled to $700bn, while average monthly wages have gone from $80 in 2000 to $200 today: not massive, but enough of a surge to explain why most Russians are happy to keep Putin at the helm.

That would be the explanation if Sunday's election were a normal one in a normal democracy. But Russia can hardly make that claim. Yes, there are freedoms that would have been unimaginable when I was last here: you can meet Sasha Petrov of Human Rights Watch in his office - rather than at a secret rendezvous - and he will tell you of his fear that Russia is moving towards a "one-party state" out loud, rather than in whispers. There are independent websites, as well as newspapers that criticise the government. Basic freedoms - to move around, to worship, to own private property - are now taken for granted. But democracy is a different story.

Television gives airtime to Putin and to a couple of licensed critics, chief among them the clownish xenophobe Vladimir Zhironovsky, whose anti-semitic rants are tolerated, if not sponsored, by the Kremlin as a useful outlet. Otherwise, no one gets a look in. Hardly a surprise, since every national TV network is now either state-run or owned by a state-run company.

Denied access to television, where Russian politics is fought, opposition groups are also starved of cash. The Kremlin saw to that when it prosecuted and jailed Russia's richest man, Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Whatever the official charges against him, his real crime was clear: he had political ambitions. The message went out to Russia's business elite: enter politics and we'll take you down. The result is that few now dare fund any opposition activity. With the rules tightening on foreign involvement in NGOs - which could see a raft of thinktanks and human rights groups closing down - the political space is shrinking.

These days, if you want to hear the opposition message you have to go out and find it. I went to the HQ of Yabloko, a pro-western liberal party that will be lucky to make a blip on Sunday. Its leader, Grigori Yavlinsky, polled 22% against Putin in the 2000 presidential election; now he can barely get a hearing. To describe the state of Russian democracy, he tells the joke of the patient on a trolley who asks the hospital orderlies where they are taking him. "To the morgue," they say. "But I'm alive!" he insists. "We're not there yet," they reply.

In other words, Russian democracy may still have the outward signs of life but not for much longer. Petrov says the political system is a "waxwork": it resembles a real system, with presidents and parliaments and elections, but don't be misled; it is a fake. All power, every decision that matters, is in the hands of one man. Putin hand-picks the mayors and regional governors who were once elected; he appoints the heads of the vast oil and gas companies, in which the state is the single biggest shareholder, and these men sit in the Kremlin as his ministers. The boundary between business and government is erased and atop it all sits Putin, the 21st-century tsar.

It's as if the president is offering two grand bargains. The first is with his people. You give up democracy, he says, and in return I shall give you prosperity. You may not be able to vote in meaningful elections, but you will be able to bank on the value of the rouble. And, while the price of oil remains high, I will make all of us better off.

Putin's second offer is to the world. Let me guarantee you a steady supply of the oil and, especially, the gas on which you rely. While I'm at it, let me help you with troublemakers such as Iran, Afghanistan or North Korea, bringing them to heel. But, says Putin, in return you must treat me with respect.

I got a sense of what that respect might entail in a meeting at the Kremlin yesterday. Led through the long Soviet-style corridors into the office of the chain-smoking spokesman Dmitry Peskov, I was told: "We're an economic power ... we're strong enough to prevent anyone interfering with our interests." Translation: we are players once more; we insist on a free hand in Chechnya and beyond.

Should we accept this bargain? The former chess champion Garry Kasparov, now active in Russian politics, wishes we wouldn't. After an opposition rally in a Moscow theatre on Monday, he explained how the west could force Putin to democratise: by hurting Putin's oligarch friends abroad. "You hit an opponent where he is weak, and his weakness is the bank accounts of his friends." Investigate those, says the grandmaster, and Putin will soon get the message.

Somehow I don't think that's going to happen. Realpolitik says we want cheap gas; we like having Russia, sandwiched between India and China, on side; and we find it useful having a "strong man" to deal with. That's good news for Putin and whoever he chooses to succeed him in 2008. It's bad news for the democrats fighting the chill in Moscow - who have learned to expect nothing else.

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