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Grazia

The famous chess player Gasparov (above at a Committee 2008 demonstration and, on the opposite page, studying a move on the chessboard) is preparing for his toughest match against Putin's hegemony.

More than Kasparov, It Would Take Superman

by Anna Zafesova

The chess grandmaster is running, but Putin's razing of the field has eliminated any alternative center of power. New political balances form and collapse within the same administration. The opposition would need independent mass media, autonomous courts, and sources of financing not conditioned by the President.

Young, charismatic, rich, famous, energetic and possibly a genius. To beat Vladimir Putin, it would take a leader with the qualities of a Superman. At least, this seems to be the thinking of the liberal Russian opposition in coming to the field with its champion, Garry Kasparov, the greatest chess master around. "Wall Street Journal" columnist, anti-Communist since an early age and famous worldwide, he was chosen by a group of politicians and business people as the symbol of the great tournament for succession in the Kremlin whose final round will be played in 2008; elimination rounds have already begun.

It will be a more challenging match than the one that Kasparov faced (and lost) against the superbrain of the IBM Deep Blue computer. The opponent of any contender seems unbeatable. In Putin's second term, the "power vertical" that he has been building patiently since 2000 now seems absolutely solidified. Shaking it is difficult, if not impossible. The oppositions have stayed out of the parliament since the 2003 elections. It will be even harder for them to pass the threshold (of 7% and even over 5%) in 2007. Television is in a vice-like propagandistic grip that removes faces and issues that displease the Kremlin from the stage. The rebellion of regional leaders was suppressed with abolishing the elections of governors; the independence of the oligarchies was squashed by the message-sending arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky and the destruction of his oil company Yukos. In the terse, unsparing words of Grigory Yavlinsky, the former leader of the liberal opposition and the Yabloko party, "to have the chance to act we need independent mass media, autonomous courts, and sources of financing not conditioned by the powers that be."

All three factors are lacking in Russia. Discussion in the three or four remaining newspapers critical of the authorities and Internet sites reach at most 5% of the population. In 99% of cases, judges give verdicts pre-packaged by the authorities. No magnate in his right mind would dream of financing a political power opposed by Putin after Khodorkovsky ended up in prison; officially for tax evasion, but those close to the Kremlin never hid that they considered the financings that the (former) richest man in Europe bestowed on liberals as tantamount to subversive activity. The would-be Davids of the liberal opposition to the Goliath of the powers-that-be started to dangerously resemble a gang of conspirators. Its heroes shuttle back and forth between Israel and London where the questionable magnate Boris Berezovsky and

Khodorkovsky's right-hand man, Leonid Nevzlin, are in refuge. Both are wanted in Russia with arrest warrants issued by order of the Kremlin. Both have made their fortunes available in the fight against Putin.

Nevzlin is convinced that the czar of the KGB is bringing Russia as close to Stalinism as it has ever been. He has cause for the belief: his best friend is in prison, under a trial that would have pleased Vyshinsky for its approximations and the grounds of accusations. His employees are arrested and pushed to confess with blackmail and the use of pharmaceutical drugs; his company, the flagship of Russian business, was plundered by the Kremlin loyal with legal sequestrers and public auctions with no transparency at all. Nevzlin says there is a need to mobilize to "stop Putin before it's too late" before the hardliners of the former KGB definitively close Russia in a vice grip of nationalism and authoritarianism. Eyes are on Kasparov, a man whose awareness that he is a legend gives him courage to publicly call the President a "fascist" and a "Caligula".

Remember Georgia and Ukraine

It was a declaration of war that resounded more loudly in Western newspapers than in Russia. The euphoria about the democratic revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine led many in Russia and elsewhere to look around for orange flags. But, the movement that came from the public in Kiev, was limited in Moscow to a few intellectual circles, a radio, two web sites, and a couple of newspapers with a circulation of a few dozen thousand copies. The liberal opposition squashed in the 2003 election is now concentrated almost exclusively around the 2008 Committee, an alliance of intellectuals, politicians and journalists led by Kasparov. All of the nomenclatures of the pro-Western faction are part of it: Boris Nemtsov, Grigory Yavlinsky and Irina Khakamada – all smart, well-respected people who for years have not managed, not even with the threat of extinction, to found a party, a coalition, a single list to gather the mere 15% above which their electorate potential has never risen.

The Russian opposition that repeats the Ukrainian miracle? Anatol Lieven of the Carnegie Foundation dismisses it as "pure illusion". The desperate search for a new face to seduce voters which has dug up the vivacious Kasparov as an alternative candidate, and the former premier Mikhail Kasyanov, does not solve the real problem of the opposition's movement: the lack of a following in public opinion. This is due to many, well-known reasons, which Lieven summarizes as the lack of a tradition like that which allowed former communist countries of Eastern Europe to quickly return to the democratic and capitalistic habits, a bourgeois revolution that only happened in 1917 to be immediately suppressed by Communism never to resurface, and an urbanization that was only completed after World War II. These conditions also apply to part of the former USSR. However, the revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine took place in countries that, despite being authoritarian, provided for the existence of an opposition. Mikhail Saakashvili and Viktor Yushenko were both high-profile supporters of the former regime who went over to the other side, in political systems where power is always fractured in groups and clans, and in which the parliament has been a theatre of concerted action



rather than a mime of democracy. In Russia, Putin's razing of the field eliminated any alternative center of political or economic power. Balances now form and collapse within the same presidential administrations, and political analysts are kept busy interpreting signs like the slightest grimace and the arrangement of places around a table to understand the new relationships of influence. In Georgia and Ukraine (as well as Kyrgyzstan), the oppositions constituted a wide coalition that enjoyed considerable foreign support and received financing (mainly American) that allowed them to recruit supporters, organize initiatives and publish newspapers. In Russia, NGOs are locked in an increasingly suffocating bureaucratic death grip and their foreign financing is strictly controlled.

Most importantly, the masses of Kiev and Tbilisi were drawn by the dream of Europe, of a life on the Western model, a kind of late-coming 1989 that swept away the former communist elite and replaced them with a nomenclature that grew in the Soviet Union, but whose interests – business, trade, ambitions – now look more to the West than to the East. Pro-Western slogans have never had appeal in Russia. What was applauded in the former USSR as the liberation of former colonies, in Russia was taken as the end of an empire; what in Kiev and Tbilisi appears as a new beginning of national renaissance is experienced in Moscow as the mortification of past greatness. As Georgy Bovt, the brilliant analyst of Profil, wrote: "Do not wish for a revolution in Russia because the only color it could take is red-brown".



Monetized welfare

Anatol Lieven shares this opinion, and advises the West to keep close to Putin: "He's an awkward partner, but if he disappeared, we'd miss him". He says that it will take at least a generation for Russians to free themselves from their desire for an iron fist, and for a chaotic and vaguely magical world view to evolve into a way of thinking and acting that no longer requires the czar role – or Superman role – for politics. Many observers agree with the pessimistic prediction that in Russia, unlike its former colonies, things can only change for the worse, and if the economic situation worsens (which is currently rosy enough to make it possible to anesthetize society), public opinion will take on a nostalgic/nationalistic bent.

A foretaste of this situation came in January when Russia also hit the streets to demonstrate in what remains the only trial that tarnished Vladimir Putin's popularity. The point of contention was the "monetization of welfare", a drastic reform that replaced the endless social benefits (such as free transportation and pharmaceuticals and discounts on condominium and municipal payments) which, in one way or other, helped two thirds of the populations, with checks of considerably lower amounts.

It only took a few days for the apparent unanimous consensus around the figure of the President to show its limits. From Vladivostok to Moscow, students and retirees, soldiers and disabled people demonstrated in a fierce protest that was wide-ranging and craving a father figure. This was a match that the Kasparov-type

_The people in Kiev and Tbilisi were drawn by the dream of being part of Europe and threw out the former communist elite. Opposite page, Yushchenko's supporters celebrate the election result and, below, a Georgian soldier leaves for a peace mission.





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Andrea Bortolotti

liberals stayed out of; and their presence was not desired. Polls conducted in those days of the 20th anniversary of Perestroika showed that over half of Russians wished they had never heard Gorbachev's name and that they would wake up in 1984 and forget the two decades of freedom like a bad dream.

Putin's approval rating, unscathed by the tragedies of Kursk, Dubrovka and Beslan, the closure of independent televisions and the persecution of executives, dropped by 20 points in a few days to a still enviable 43 percent. The government ran for cover and amended the welfare law. Yet, it seemed that the protest had upset a precarious balance. While the voices of complaint in a few liberal circles was joined by a low, diffuse grumbling in the streets, political jokes started to circulate again, and people started changing the channel at the sight of the omnipresent Putin. Here and there little fires flared up, difficult to extinguish with simple fire extinguishers. In Ossetia, in Karachaevo-Circassia, in Ingushetia, the people rose against the local governments of Putin faithful. Caucasian uprisings, intricate criminal feuds (as in Karachaevo-Circassia) and consequences of tragedies like Beslan (in Ossetia). The protest is gradually expanding to the other national regions governed by despots supported by the Kremlin: in Bashkiria the people rose up against Murtaza Rakhimov, the authoritarian patriarch of the Muslim republic. An ecumenical collection of communists, liberals, unions and associations for human rights mobilized against the man who has been ruling with an iron fist for over ten years. The many-striped front asked for, in addition to the unmovable Rakhimov's removal, the abolition of reforms in welfare and the municipal sector, essentially a return to socialism.

Waiting for 2008

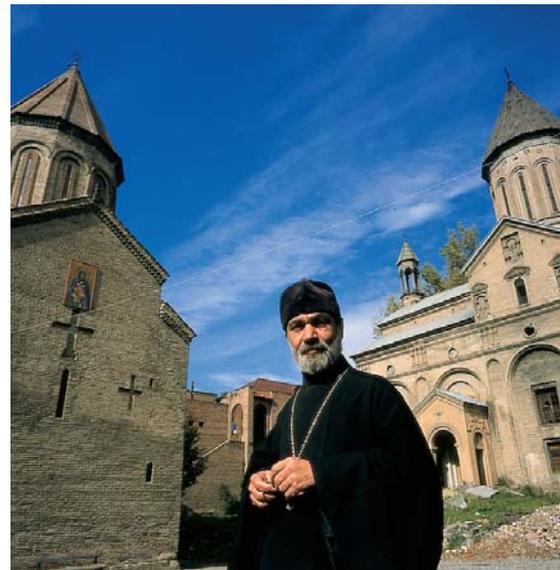
There is a quiet and confused simmering that mixes liberal and nostalgic aspirations, dreams of a democratic West and a great imperial Russia, the equalitarianism of socialist realism, nationalistic leanings of minorities and the racist xenophobia of Russians. The only clear common feature is the growing intolerance of the government's corruptions and inefficiency. While Putin is considered too much of a repressive hardliner in the West, in Russia, he risks, if anything, losing consensus for being too weak and reformist. Nonetheless, there is this simmering and there is no longer that stagnant swamp in which pro-Western liberals sought to keep afloat with their last strength. This is evidenced by the unease the Kremlin is showing with the nearing of the fateful date in 2008. Technically, Putin cannot run a third time. Discussion revolves around three hypotheses: an amendment to the Constitution that would allow a third term (an option that Putin has so far said he opposes) or a system reform that shifts the center of power from the President to the Premier (who would of course happen to be called Vladimir Putin). The Committee 2008 plans to fight these tricks; it was in fact founded to give Russians the first political civil alternative of their history.

The much-awaited event is the elections. The vote was the crucial turning point of the revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, the only moment in which the electorate has the possibility of influencing events. No one, in Russia or elsewhere, seriously considers the possibility that there will be clean elections

that will produce a genuine alternative government. Moreover, electoral studies in Russian regions show levels of manipulations, gerrymandering, exclusions of the opposition and media pressures no less than those in Ukraine or Kyrgyzstan. Yet, in Kiev and Bishkek, the seemingly tried and true mechanism of smooth “succession” within the pantomime of the elections went awry, and this frightens Moscow. Another cause of concern is that while the election data of the local parliaments (and of governors until they were abolished) show the victory of the candidates in power almost without exception, there was also abstentionism of three quarters of the electorate and up to 20% of the voters checked the “against all” box in a lost protest vote that shows that discontent is wider than they would have us believe.

Likewise, they are frightened by the sudden collapse of systems that seemed as monolithic as Putin’s “power vertical”. Georgy Bovt borrowed the term “failed States”, coined for Latin America, to explain the phenomenon. He says that post-Soviet elites are ineffective thieves who fail to create a genuine consensus either among the people or among the nomenclatures. The State continues to function out of inertia more than anything else. Yet, at the first blow, these ultra centralized “verticals” were founded on connivance and fear collapse onto themselves. Tellingly, Eduard Shevardnadze, Leonid Kuchma and Askar Akaev, the three leaders deposed by revolutions in the former Soviet republics, quickly negotiated with the oppositions for their physical and financial safety. Without a strategy other than grabbing the money and running away at the right time, the armies (consisting of conscripted soldiers) and the police (abandoned by the government to the self-financing of corruption) do not line up in defense of the owners, while the political class is not able to either prevent nor adequately react to the crisis. This crisis always erupts as a surprise, partly because the feedback mechanism of information in an authoritarian system ends up presenting a false picture to subjects and rulers alike. A striking example of this phenomenon is in the reports, discovered by “Novaja Gazeta”, sent from the provinces to the Kremlin about the reaction to monetizing welfare, where the protest was downplayed and popular demonstrations in favor of reducing benefits were painted in rosy hues.

Thus, there is a fragile, precarious balance, a kind of quiet before the storm and no one knows where the storm will come from or which way it will blow. But, at this point, no one, neither the opposition nor the Kremlin seems in doubt that the outlook is grim. The Russian opposition – meaning, more than parties, the mood of public opinion – has been marginalized, removed from society’s subconscious and therefore monitoring its development seems impossible, even for the opposition. There are no official spaces for dialoguing, corrupting, convincing or compromising. Popular revolt becomes the only way to change anything. And in Kremlin custom, it is unbecoming a government to give way to the pressure of protest demonstrations. Putin has never recalled a governor against which the population revolted, even after Beslan in which the responsibility of the Osset President Dzasokov was clear. Even in Karachaevo-Circassia, after revolt erupted when the local President’s son-in-law had killed seven people in a settling of accounts.



Putin’s popularity took a major hit when the welfare law revealed growing intolerance among regular people of the corruption and inefficiency of the government. The political demand that seems to dominate Russia is for now one of economic populism and imperialistic nationalism, while the word “reform” makes most of the population, uneasy.

Fires flaring in places that seemed perfectly under control from the start, and extinguished only on the surface, while, Bovt warns, the danger is the discontent that has been forced to burrow deep in a political system that has excluded the opposition as a category. The match between Garry Kasparov and Vladimir Putin will probably be played only on the pages of the "Wall Street Journal". Yet, another game is underway of which we do not yet know the rules or the players. The political demand that seems to dominate Russia is for now one of economic populism and imperialistic nationalism, while the word "reform" makes most of the population jittery.

Yet, in the silence of a consumerist private individual chosen almost as a form of political dissent lurks the generation of capitalism's fortunate ones, those young people (or not so young people) who made their way in the new model, that middle class invoked for so many years that cannot subscribe to the traditional czar and subject model in its countless re-edition. Moreover, until a few months ago, Ukraine was a third world country in the midst of Europe, the object of condescending smiles from the East and West, apparently condemned to unending corrupt backwardness. The accusations of the liberal opposers in Moscow and St. Petersburg seem dictated more by the need for an image than by a real conviction that a revolution can be effected in Russia of a color yet to be determined. However, dictatorships always seem intractable until they fall.

