

**MARC BENNETTS**

**KICKING  
THE  
KREMLIN**

**RUSSIA'S NEW DISSIDENTS AND  
THE BATTLE TO TOPPLE PUTIN**



ONE WORLD

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# LIST OF MAIN CHARACTERS

## THE KREMLIN AND ITS ALLIES

<b>Vladimir Putin</b>	Long-time ruler of Russia, ex-KGB officer
<b>Dmitry Medvedev</b>	Putin's political protégé, Russia's 'chief blogger'
<b>Vladislav Surkov</b>	Putin's grey cardinal, fan of gangsta rap
<b>Patriarch Kirill</b>	Head of the Orthodox Church, connoisseur of luxury watches
<b>Alexander Bastrykin</b>	Russia's top investigator, opposition persecutor

## THE ANTI-PUTIN MOVEMENT

<b>Alexei Navalny</b>	Protest figurehead, Russia's alternative 'chief blogger'
<b>Sergei Udaltsov</b>	Leftist leader, fan of 'really heavy underground rock'
<b>Pussy Riot</b>	Anti-Putin punk group, keen on multi-coloured balaclavas
<b>Eduard Limonov</b>	The granddaddy of Russian radical politics
<b>Yevgenia Chirikova</b>	Eco-activist who failed to notice the collapse of the Soviet Union



*'God save us from seeing a Russian revolt,  
meaningless and merciless!'*

ALEXANDER PUSHKIN

*The Captain's Daughter* (1836)





*This book is dedicated to my wife,  
Tanya Nevinskaya, with much love.  
Thank you for everything – but  
especially for Masha!*



# PROLOGUE

## ONE DAY IN DECEMBER

*'Rossiya bez Putina!'* came the chant. Then again, louder now, as if the tens of thousands of protesters had convinced themselves the first time around that such a thing might actually be attainable. 'Russia without Putin! Russia without Putin!'

The words floated high into the Russian capital's frigid winter skies. The slogan would, a speaker promised as demonstrators stamped their feet to keep warm, be audible in the nearby Kremlin. Especially if the protesters turned towards its elaborate towers, still topped by Soviet-era ruby-red stars, and shouted the rallying cry once more.

Up until that exact moment, the possibility of a Russia without Vladimir Putin in charge had appeared about as probable as a Moscow winter without snow. Or, perhaps, a Russia without the engrained, high-level corruption that had seen the country slide to the very lower reaches of Transparency International's global corruption index, sharing 143rd place out of 182 nations with Nigeria.<sup>1</sup>

But, on 10 December 2011, at Moscow's Bolotnaya Square, less than a week after what had looked like a blatant case of mass vote-rigging to secure Putin's United Russia party an unlikely parliamentary majority,

nothing was unthinkable anymore. Moscow's richest and most educated residents – the so-called 'creative class' – were suddenly out on the streets in an unprecedented show of discontent. Even rank-and-file riot police looked taken aback at the size of the crowd. I spotted a group of officers taking snapshots of protesters, including a bride still in her white wedding dress, on mobile phones. (This could, of course, quite easily have been for surveillance purposes.)

'To fight for your rights is easy and pleasant. There is nothing to be afraid of,' said Alexei Navalny, the opposition's de facto leader, in a message passed out of a Moscow detention facility. 'Every one of us has the most powerful and only weapon we need – a sense of our own worthiness.'<sup>2</sup>

Could Putin hear them? I wondered. Could he hear the disparate gathering of liberals, nationalists and leftists? The humiliated and the insulted? And, if he could, what did he feel? Fear? Shock? Or, perhaps, scorn? While large-scale dissent was a new thing for modern Russia, Putin could still boast of approval ratings that were the envy of any Western leader. He also possessed an incomparable control over national television channels, the main source of news for the vast majority of Russians.

I looked around the square at the families, the pensioners, the young men and women flush with the excitement of participation in a genuinely historic moment. 'I never thought I'd see this,' a veteran activist told me, the words pouring from her. 'In the past, a few hundred people turned up to protest rallies, but just look at how many there are here now. A lot of people have come to a demonstration for the first time – and not the last.'



The mass anti-Putin protests that began in Moscow that afternoon confounded analysts and inspired Kremlin critics, both of whom had believed that the ex-KGB officer's long stranglehold over political life meant such a thing was all but impossible. As crowds wearing the white ribbons that quickly became the symbol of the protest movement filled the streets of the Russian capital, Putin's foes could have been forgiven for believing that their arch-nemesis's days were numbered. The Kremlin seemed initially

uncertain how to respond to the mass protests, alternately threatening and making half-hearted proposals on political reform. 'It appeared back then to many people that victory was just around the corner,' recalled Sergei Udaltsov, the fiery, shaven-headed leftist who 'symbolically' tore up a Putin portrait to ecstatic applause at a February 2012 Moscow rally.<sup>3</sup>

It would not be quite so easy to get rid of the man himself. 'Do we love Russia?' Putin yelled at a rare presidential election campaign rally in south Moscow in the spring of 2012, jabbing his finger into the driving sleet. 'Of course we do,' he continued, after the cries of '*da*' had faded away. 'And there are tens of millions of people like us all across Russia.

'The battle for Russia goes on!' Putin told the crowd, many of them bussed in en masse from the country's conservative heartland, as his speech came to an end, his hand reaching up then swiftly down as if to snatch victory from the chill Moscow air. 'And we will triumph!'<sup>4</sup>

Inevitably, within weeks of Putin's controversial return to the Kremlin in May 2012, the long-expected clampdown began. 'They ruined my big day,' Putin was widely reported to have said of the protesters who had marred his inauguration for a third presidential term. 'Now I'm going to ruin their lives.'<sup>5</sup>

First, a series of laws designed to make open dissent harder and more dangerous was fast-tracked through a compliant parliament. Next, Putin and his allies in the increasingly powerful Investigative Committee – an FBI-style law-enforcement agency answerable only to the president – systematically set about neutralizing the protest leaders and their most vocal supporters through a combination of smear campaigns, politically motivated criminal charges and darkly absurd show trials.

'No 1937!' chanted protesters, a reference to the year that saw the peak of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin's Great Terror, as the first opposition figures were jailed or charged. For many, the analogy was insulting to the millions of victims of Stalin's purges: after all, no one was being shot in the back of the head or sent to the frozen north to be worked to death. But for Russia's modern-day dissidents, as they languished in grimy pre-trial detention centres or served time in remote penal colonies, there could be little doubt that the Kremlin had regained a taste for political repression.

However, even the threat of jail would be unable to crush the protest movement entirely. ‘Wake up Russia!’ read a flyer handed out at a Moscow demonstration in early 2012, and, for many, the protests were life-changing events, transforming thousands of ordinary Russians into active opponents of Putin’s rule. Backing down when the going got tough was simply not an option.



The protests were greeted with almost unanimous enthusiasm in the West. The ‘Snow Revolutionaries’ who threw down the biggest challenge to Putinism were heralded as representatives of a new, freer generation of Russians. But it was a knee-jerk approval, an instinctive keenness for ‘my enemy’s enemy’, without any real understanding of the nature of these protest groups. Few took the time to examine their ideologies and beliefs, or to ask what it would mean for Russia – and the West – if they were actually to succeed in toppling Putin.

For this book, I have explored Russia’s new protest movement in all its bewildering diversity, from the radical left-wingers seeking to set the country once more on the path to communism to the iPad-toting hipsters who, as one young activist put it, wish to ‘live in Europe, without leaving Russia’. I sought out not only its high-profile leaders and the lesser-known activists who are the backbone of the movement, but also its opponents, from pro-Kremlin officials to Church leaders. Like the protest movement itself, my investigations are focused largely, but not exclusively, on Moscow. Discontent may be widespread in the provinces, but it is in the Russian capital that history has always been made.

Almost a decade and a half after he first addressed Russians as their new president, it is hard to recall a time when the ‘national leader’ of the largest country on Earth was a virtual unknown, a faceless politician who was expected to be little more than a footnote in post-Soviet Russia’s short history. But Putin proved the sceptics wrong, first consolidating and then strengthening his unlikely grip on power. He shows few signs of wanting to let go.

# 1

## PUTIN'S PACT

President Boris Yeltsin had earned a reputation for the sensational and the unpredictable during his two terms in the Kremlin, from ordering tanks to shell an unruly Russian parliament, to playing the spoons on the bald head of Askar Akayev, the president of ex-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. And, on 31 December 1999, with the world fretting over the potential menace to global security posed by the Y2K millennium computer bug, Yeltsin captured the headlines again.

'I am leaving. I have done all I could,' modern Russia's first president said as he addressed the nation for the final time, his words slurred by a combination of ill health and a well-documented alcohol problem. Bloated and sickly, Yeltsin bore little resemblance to the energetic and charismatic politician who in 1991 had defied Communist hardliners seeking to overturn Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms.

The timing of Yeltsin's departure half a year ahead of the scheduled presidential elections was surprising, but his decision was welcomed by the overwhelming majority of Russians, who had grown weary of the poverty and lawlessness that their country had slid into following the sudden break-up of the Soviet Union.

‘Many of our dreams failed to come true,’ Yeltsin continued, with typical bluntness, as millions watched his televised speech. ‘Things we thought would be easy turned out to be painfully hard. I am sorry that I did not live up to the hopes of people who believed that we could, with a single effort, a single strong push, jump out of our grey, stagnant, totalitarian past and into a bright, wealthy, civilized future.

‘A new generation is coming,’ he went on. ‘They can do more, and better.’<sup>1</sup>

As the Kremlin clock ticked down to the new millennium, a grim-faced representative of that ‘new generation’ addressed Russia as acting president for the first time.

‘Like you, I intended this evening to listen to the New Year greetings of President Boris Yeltsin,’ said Vladimir Putin, the little-known, former security-services chief Yeltsin had recently appointed as Russia’s third prime minister in less than a year. ‘But things turned out otherwise.’

As if sensing his fellow citizens’ yearning for a strong hand, the new president spoke firmly and deliberately. The contrast with the almost incoherent Yeltsin was striking.

‘I want to warn that any attempt to exceed the limits of Russia’s law and the Russian constitution will be decisively crushed,’ Putin said. Then, without missing a beat, he made a pledge that his opponents would later accuse him of breaking, time and time again.

‘The freedom of speech, the freedom of conscience, the freedom of the media and property rights, these fundamental principles of a civilized society will be protected by the state,’ he declared, a Russian flag to his right.

Putin paused. This was the head of state’s annual New Year’s Eve address; even an acting president in the job for less than a day would be expected to offer a holiday toast.

‘Let’s raise a glass for a new century for Russia,’ he said, his tone and expression unchanged. ‘And for love and peace in every one of our homes.’<sup>2</sup> The camera faded out.

Putin had not smiled once during his more than three-minute speech. Watching in the company of Russian friends, I was not alone in noting he had also declined to drink to his own toast.



That night, as Russians saw in the New Year at parties across their vast country, when the talk turned to the new man in the Kremlin, it was inevitably positive. After years of Yeltsin's drunken antics, the teetotal, German-speaking Putin found strong initial support among young people, residents of Moscow and the highly educated. Ironically, these very same social groups would later form the core of the opposition to his rule.

'I really liked Putin when he first came to power,' recalled Yevgenia Chirikova, a bitter Kremlin critic who by her own admission was a 'political dunce' throughout most of Putin's first two terms. 'I remember how I used to cringe whenever they showed Yeltsin meeting foreign politicians. I'd think, "Oh no, he's going to embarrass us again." But Putin didn't drink, and that was important. He was young and he seemed very capable.'<sup>3</sup>



I had arrived in Moscow for the first time in the spring of 1997, early on in Yeltsin's second term. Life back then in Russia was exhilarating, but also grotesque, as a people cast adrift from the safety nets of the Soviet system floundered in the rough waters of the free market. The ideologies that had dominated political and public life for most of the previous century had been unceremoniously tossed on to history's garbage dump, leaving a nation accustomed to a frequently dreary, predictable life centred on a lip-service to Marxism and Leninism to adapt to this strange new beast called capitalism. It was a task many were simply not up to: suicide rose, mental-health problems mushroomed and crime rocketed. Contract killings became almost an accepted mode of business negotiation. All over the country, fearful householders fitted steel doors.

Yeltsin and his government had wasted no time in introducing the 'shock therapy' economic reforms championed by their US advisers, and millions were quickly plunged into poverty. As ideological and economic uncertainties ravaged Russia, a centuries-old belief in the supernatural and the occult re-emerged to fill the gap left by the sudden collapse of the

Soviet system. Russians had once relied on Communist Party officials to organize their lives for them; in the 1990s they turned en masse to wild-eyed 'psychic healers' and urban 'wizards' to resolve their problems. A people unused to the complexities of capitalism were likewise easy game for financial conmen: millions suffered when a massive Ponzi scheme collapsed in 1994. In a sign of the widespread desperation, liberals began discussing the need for a 'Russian Pinochet' – the Chilean dictator who brought his homeland both terror and eventual economic prosperity.

Russia was a dead empire, rotting fast. It was a world where the weak suffered terrible indignities and the rich had no inhibitions about flaunting their newfound fortunes. For me, the chaos of the Yeltsin years was perhaps best summed up by the bribe of \$20 that a group of brand-new and very drunk Muscovite friends gave a bus driver late one snowy night to persuade him to alter his scheduled route drastically and drop us off at their doorway. The driver hadn't even haggled, so eager was he to get his hands on the cash.

The break-up of the Soviet Union meant Russians were freer than they had ever been, but at what cost? Soviet propaganda had depicted life in the West as unrelenting misery for all but the very richest, and the 1990s seemed to prove the Communists had been right. 'Everything our leaders told us about Communism was false. But it turns out that everything they told us about capitalism was true,' Russians joked bitterly.

Sights that had been almost unthinkable under the Soviet authorities became the norm in the newly independent Russia. Pensioners selling their household possessions piece by piece in filthy underpasses to buy their daily bread. Gangs of homeless children scavenging for food. Crippled soldiers back from Chechnya begging for money to drink away the day. Highly educated people – professors, lawyers, physicists – forced to moonlight as taxi drivers to supplement their meagre, or often non-existent, official salaries. The former superpower was visited by a host of humiliations.

On one evening in my first long, hazy winter in Moscow, I found myself drinking with strangers on a patch of snowy wasteland. 'We used to be a great country, you know? We could have fucked anyone over,'

an unshaven, off-duty police officer muttered half to himself, half to me, before pouring another shot of vodka into the plastic cups that had appeared from nowhere.

Less than a year later, in August 1998, Russia defaulted on its debt, the rouble was devalued and millions lost their life savings – again.

In the euphoric aftermath of the largely peaceful collapse of the Soviet state, the well-known literary critic Yury Karyakin had declared: 'For the first time in this century, God has smiled on Russia.' As the 1990s dragged to an end, the Almighty, went the whispers, had turned His face away from Mother Russia. 'Russia is cursed,' a friend wailed late one night just after the default. 'The sooner I get out of here the better.'

## 'PUTIN SAVED RUSSIA'

Putin knew what his fellow citizens wanted and he intended to deliver. 'Russians have had no sense of stability for the past ten years,' he told state television in a wide-ranging interview less than two months after taking over from Yeltsin. 'We hope to return this feeling.'<sup>4</sup> And over the next eight years, he set about doing just that. By May 2008, towards the end of Putin's second term in office, Russia, on the surface at least, had been transformed. Its major cities, from the Pacific Coast to its European borders, were almost unrecognizable. On the bare spot of land where I had listened to the vodka-guzzling cop, a bright, three-storey shopping centre had sprung up. Salaries were not only being paid on time, but they were also higher than ever before. The disastrous war in Chechnya was as good as over and the devastated republic's capital, Grozny, was being reconstructed from scratch. Its central thoroughfare would soon be renamed 'Putin Avenue'. The Kremlin strongman may have ridden roughshod over post-Soviet democratic reforms and been aided immensely by rocketing prices for oil – Russia's main export and the lynchpin of its economy – but there was no denying that Russians had never had it so good.

Flush with oil dollars, the streets of Russia's major cities suddenly began to fill with advertisements for easy loans, or *kredit*, and a people

long accustomed to thrift suddenly found they could afford foreign holidays, new cars and plasma-screen TVs. Although political freedoms were being curtailed and high-level corruption was soaring, it seemed churlish to complain about such things when you could spend two weeks a year sunning yourself at a Turkish Black Sea resort and then come back to your newly installed home entertainment centre. And the TV programmes Russians could now watch were not the comforting lies of Soviet-era broadcasting, where everything had been – as the Siberian punk rocker Yegor Letov once screeched caustically – ‘going to plan’. The Kremlin’s new spin doctors – ‘political technologists’ – were sharper than that. Modern Russian TV was not shy about the country’s many problems. But the underlying message was this: ‘If you think things are bad now, just remember what they were like under Yeltsin.’

And so Russians stayed, for the large part, silent as the independent media was strangled, the courts and parliament tamed, and money that should have been used to build up vital infrastructure was often siphoned out of the country. Yes, public health services were dangerously unfit for purpose, but at least you could choose from a dozen types of pizza – or cheaper and more available than ever vodka – at the new hypermarket. For the majority, it was simply a case of making the best of a bad deal; opinion polls regularly indicated that the vast majority of Russians felt they could have no influence on political developments. So why not take the sweeteners Putin was offering? A 13% flat income-tax rate introduced early on in Putin’s first term did nothing to dissuade the tiny middle class that this unspoken agreement with the Kremlin was one worth sticking to.

‘People agreed on a pact with the devil,’ said Oleg Orlov, the veteran head of Memorial, Russia’s oldest human-rights organization. ‘They said, “We will stay out of the social and political process and concentrate on our private lives – just don’t touch us and leave us a small slice of the profits from your oil booty.”’<sup>5</sup>

It was, as the Russians like to say, a simple case of ‘sausages in exchange for freedom’. Sausages, predictably, won out. ‘What good is freedom of speech if my fridge is empty?’ an elderly woman asked me in the central Russian city of Voronezh, midway through Putin’s second term.

I wasn't sure what to reply, so I mumbled something about how, in an ideal world, she would have both. My answer didn't impress her.

'Both?' she retorted incredulously. 'Who is going to give me both?'



Putin also set about restoring national pride, which had been battered by the loss of Moscow's superpower status. For a people who had been brought up on stirring patriotic songs that proclaimed 'The Red Army is the strongest',<sup>6</sup> Russia's near impotence on the international arena throughout the 1990s was an unheralded disgrace. Under Yeltsin, a toothless Kremlin was powerless even to prevent NATO from bombing Serbia, Russia's Orthodox Christian ally, in 1999.

Much of what Putin did was cosmetic, such as the resumption of flights by strategic bombers over the Arctic, Atlantic and Pacific oceans in August 2007, but there was also a bite to the president's bark. In August 2008, Russian forces defeated the former Soviet republic of Georgia – and its US military advisers – in a five-day war over the breakaway republic of South Ossetia. 'Putin's Plan for Russia is Victory!' had read the propaganda posters in the months before fighting broke out, and, for many, the destruction of the Georgian military in the South Caucasus was mere confirmation that the 'national leader' was a man who delivered on his promises. In the immediate aftermath of the conflict, Putin's approval ratings soared to over 80%. Earlier the same year, in a sign of the Kremlin's growing confidence, Russia had displayed its intercontinental ballistic missile launchers on Red Square for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union. High-profile sporting triumphs and – bizarrely – a Russian victory at the Eurovision Song Contest were also hyped by state-run media as indications that the country was on the verge of regaining its superpower status.

It was around this time that the sale of Putin memorabilia went overboard – shops were suddenly full of clocks, mugs and even wall rugs bearing his image. 'Who buys a Putin wall rug?' I asked a shop assistant at a market near Moscow, unable to contain my curiosity.

‘Usually office workers, for their bosses,’ she told me, after a moment of hesitation while she considered whether to answer.

Putin’s successes earned him praise from unlikely quarters. ‘Putin inherited a ransacked and bewildered country, with a poor and demoralized people,’ said Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Nobel Prize-winning chronicler of Soviet gulags. ‘And he started to do what was possible – a slow and gradual restoration. These efforts were not noticed, nor appreciated, immediately.’<sup>7</sup>

Solzhenitsyn was not the only fan. ‘I want a man like Putin, full of strength / I want a man like Putin, who doesn’t drink / I want a man like Putin, who won’t offend me / I want a man like Putin, who won’t run away,’ went the lyrics to an infectious hit by a female pop duo.<sup>8</sup>

A few weeks after Russia had flashed its big guns at the world, I spent the afternoon wandering the streets of Tobolsk, a small, partially ramshackle town in west Siberia. I hadn’t come to Tobolsk because of politics – I was on a travel-writing assignment – but everywhere I looked there seemed to be images of Putin. Eventually, tired by my explorations and weary of the sight of the ex-KGB man, I ended up at a local arts centre, where I made the acquaintance of Minsalim, a friendly, self-proclaimed shaman with unruly white hair and an obsession with Britain. Minsalim, it turned out, made a living by carving ornaments from the mammoth bone preserved in the region’s permafrost soil, and he was eager to show off his work to me: ‘Her Majesty’s representative!’ The centrepiece of his collection was a tiny figure that the shaman had somehow managed to invest with a startling resemblance to Russia’s steely-eyed leader. ‘Putin saved Russia – like a Siberian hero of old,’ Minsalim intoned. He may have been a shaman, but I half expected him to cross himself.

In less than a decade, the little-known prime minister that Yeltsin had told to ‘take care of Russia’ had transformed himself into a modern-day tsar in the Kremlin, eliminating all but the most stubborn opposition to his rule. But who was he, this cocksure, diminutive man who emerged from the shadows of the security services to rule the largest country on Earth? What forces had shaped him, and how had he risen so far, so fast?