



LETTER FROM MOSCOW

THE CIVIL ARCHIPELAGO

How far can the resistance to Vladimir Putin go?

BY DAVID REMNICK

On the night of November 20th, two weeks before elections for the State Duma, Vladimir Putin set aside the cares of the Kremlin and went to the Olympic SportComplex for an ultimate-fighting match—a “no rules” heavyweight bout between a Cyclopean Russian named Fedor (the Last Emperor) Yemelianenko and a self-described anarchist from

Olympia, Washington, named Jeff (the Snowman) Monson. The bout was broadcast nationally on Rossiya-2, one of the main state television channels. Putin, wearing a blue suit and no tie, was at ringside. He has always been eager to project the macho posture of a muzhik, a real man. He has had himself photographed riding horses bare-chested, tracking ti-

gers, shooting a whale with a crossbow, piloting a firefighting jet, swimming a Siberian river, steering a Formula One race car, befriending Jean-Claude Van Damme, and riding with a motorcycle gang. Once, on national television, he tried to bend a frying pan with his bare hands. He did not quite succeed, but the effort was appreciated. And now ultimate

In May, Human Rights Watch brought Platon to Russia to photograph activists. Above: Antifa youth, who battle the spread of fascism.

fighting: the beery crowd of twenty thousand—some prosperous, some less so—were his own, Putin's people.

Yemelienenko and Monson were of a rough equivalence: heads shaved, two enormous sacks of rocks, though the Russian was distinguished by his unstained skin; Monson had tattoos from ankle to neck, including two in crowd-friendly Cyrillic—*svoboda* and *solidarnost*. The gesture got him nowhere. Almost from the start, the Russian dominated the fight. Yemelienenko, with a deft and powerful kick, snapped a bone in Monson's leg, causing the American to limp pitifully. But, even as Yemelienenko took command, steadily reducing Monson to a swollen, bloody pulp—a source of pleasure to the crowd—it was hard to tell if Putin was enjoying himself. The camera flashed to him now and then. He barely betrayed a smile. His face, now smoothed with Botox and filler (it is said), is more enigmatic than ever. What was more, he had larger concerns. He knew that, no matter how hard his operatives tried to get out the vote in the provinces and massage the results, the Kremlin party, United Russia, was going to lose ground.

At the end of the bout—a unanimous decision for Yemelienenko—the Prime Minister climbed through the ropes to pay tribute to the loser and to congratulate his countryman. By this time, the American handlers were tenderly helping their warrior to the dressing room. Monson could no longer walk. His lips were as fat as bicycle tires.

Putin had a kind word for Monson (“a real man”) and paid Yemelienenko the ultimate compliment of Russian masculinity, calling him a “*nastoyashii Russki bogatyr*”—a genuine Russian hero. As Putin spoke, and as the national audience watched, many in the crowd started to jeer and whistle. This had never happened to Putin before, not once in two four-year terms as President, not

in three-plus years as Prime Minister. And yet now, having announced his intention to reassume the Presidency in March, possibly for another twelve years, he was experiencing an unmistakable tide of derision.

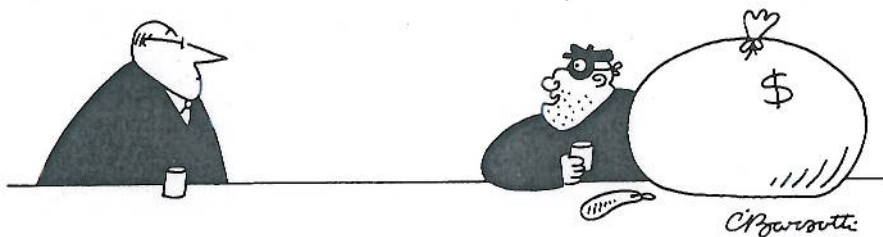
When I first watched the YouTube video of the event—a video that went viral across Russia—I thought immediately of the May Day parade twenty-one years ago, when I stood in Red Square and watched as thousands of people suddenly stopped marching across the cobblestones, looked up at Mikhail Gorbachev and the rest of the Soviet leadership perched atop Lenin's tomb, and shouted their rage. “Resign!” some cried. “Shame on you!” They unfurled banners reading “Down with the Empire and Red Fascism!” and “Communists: Have No Illusions. You Are Bankrupt.” They waved the flags of the runaway Baltic republics. They waved the red flags of the Soviet Union with the hammer and sickle cut out. A Russian Orthodox priest hoisted a sign reading, “Mikhail Sergeyevich, Christ Has Risen!” With the help of a pair of binoculars, I had an excellent view of Gorbachev's expression, and those of the other leaders, as they shuffled around in shock. There was no Botox yet in Moscow, and these men were visibly alarmed. After more than twenty minutes, when the rambunctious parade showed no signs of moving on, Gorbachev signalled to the leadership, and they slunk off the tomb and through a door back into the Kremlin.

During the late eighties and the nineties, state television was electric with argument, truth-telling, irony, hysteria, and scandal. Under Putin, TV news is exquisitely monitored and unwatchably bland. You can often say what you want in print, on the radio, and on the Web, but state television is, in the eyes of the Kremlin, what counts. The night of the bout, the bureaucrats who run Rossiya-2 knew their job; when they showed taped

highlights later on, they washed out the sound of the jeering. One of the leaders of a Kremlin-organized pro-Putin youth group called Nashi declared that the ruckus at the arena was nothing other than the impatience of fans eager to get to the rest rooms. But on the viral video the dissatisfaction was clear. The leading opposition blogger and activist, Alexei Navalny, even headlined his fevered post “The End of an Epoch.”

It is not the end of an epoch. It would be hasty, in fact, to declare the event the beginning of the end. Any comparison to the May Day events of 1990, much less to Tahrir Square, last winter—an event discussed constantly in political circles in Moscow—discounts the fact that millions of Russians remain apolitical and atomized, and have learned to live with a system that provides few legal guarantees but does offer some economic advancement. Yet even before the Duma elections something was clear. Despite Putin's high approval ratings—sixty-something per cent, down from the mid-eighties, in 2007—the Russian people can no longer be portrayed as uniformly bovine and apathetic, anesthetized by stability. United Russia is deeply resented for its sense of cynical entitlement and its colossally corrupt relations with the oil, gas, and timber industries. Viktor Shenderovich, who, before being blackballed under Putin, was a subversive political comedian on television, wrote on the Web site Daily Journal that the Prime Minister, who prides himself on his populism, had encountered at the Olympic arena not the disgruntled liberal intelligentsia but the *narod*, the people. “After these significant boos and the cry of ‘Get lost,’ the end for Putinism could be very near or very far,” he wrote. “It makes no sense to guess the timing. But it's a fact that a point of no return has been passed.”

Predictions really are a mug's game. The jeering at the Olympic arena was presaged by many other events, especially after Putin announced, in September, that it had been decided “years ago” that he would run for President next March, implying further that Dmitri Medvedev, the President since 2008, would plunge deeper into Putin's pocket, and become Prime Minister. It seemed that many people could not bear the presumption, the



“Let's just say someone has slipped out of the top one per cent.”

brazen predestination. In the Siberian mining city of Kemerovo, fans at a concert by the band Time Machine booed the m.c. when he announced that United Russia was behind the event; in Chelyabinsk, in the Urals, hockey fans shouted down a team captain who was made to read a statement in support of United Russia. Russian-language news sites and blogs are filled with such reports, and they are increasing.

A week after the incident at the Olympic arena, I paid a call on Putin's redoubtable spokesman, Dmitri Peskov. Tall and mustachioed, Peskov is a kind of ideal projection of his man; he is wisened-up, worldly, professional, and subtly forbidding. When he lies, he knows that you know, and you know that he knows that you know. The smile is also meant to convey another message to foreign visitors: So, we're cynical. And you're not?

When I asked Peskov about the jeering, he unspooled a convoluted hypothesis about how the crowd might have been reacting to the image of Monson being helped to the locker room: "We called him after that, and he said it's normal that in America when a beaten guy is leaving the hall they often boo." Peskov, being as skillful and as modern as the regime he serves, then switched from bald-faced nonsense to allowing at least part of the truth. "I also heard some voices, three or four men," he said. "Someone really shouted out, 'Putin, go away!'"

When I asked why state television altered the sound for replays, he said, "They switched off the noise."

Yes, but why? I said.

"I don't know exactly," Peskov replied. "That was the choice of the editor." Peskov couldn't help smiling at this specimen of disingenuousness. And why did Putin cancel an appointment two nights later to attend an anti-drug concert in St. Petersburg? Instead, the Kremlin sent a deputy prime minister, Dmitri Kozak, to represent United Russia, and so it was poor Kozak who endured the catcalls. "Putin wasn't supposed to go," Peskov said. "Trust me."

Recently, I walked past 38 Petrovka—the headquarters of the Interior police—and crossed the street to the new headquarters of Memorial, a civil-rights group that began in 1987. Those

were the early days of glasnost, when all kinds of *neformaly*, informal civic political groups, with names like Moscow Tribune and the Club of Social Initiatives, were suddenly allowed to bloom. The organizers of Memorial, some of them former dissidents and political prisoners, began with the idea that progress was impossible without proper commemoration of the horrors of the Soviet past. Activists for Memorial collected tens of thousands of signatures on petitions urging the Communist Party to build a monument to the "victims of illegal repressions" under Stalin. After a series of marches, conventions, and encounters with the Kremlin leadership, Memorial spread to dozens of provincial cities and towns.

Gorbachev was convinced that, in order to reform the country, he had to win over the intellectual class, and in 1988 he endorsed the idea of a monument at a Communist Party conference. But he was ambivalent about Memorial itself, rightly seeing it as the seed of a broader political opposition that would end up questioning the legitimacy of the system itself. "We have to somehow de-energize Memorial, really give it a local character," he declared to the politburo. "What this is about is not Memorial. It's a cover for something else." Gorbachev did not crack down on Memorial, but the group wasn't allowed to register, a bureaucratic maneuver that hampered its ability to collect funds and operate smoothly. At Andrei Sakharov's funeral, in 1989, Gorbachev asked Sakharov's widow, Elena Bonner, if there was anything he could do for her. She said, "Register Memorial."

Memorial survived. The Soviet Union did not. At Memorial's new headquarters, underwritten in part by the Ford Foundation and U.S.A.I.D., I was shown around the library and the archives, where, in the past two decades, scholars have done research for hundreds of new publications on the Soviet past. An archivist opened drawers filled with handkerchiefs, drawings, and other modest artifacts made, surreptitiously, by prisoners in the Gulag. The archivist pulled, at random, the file of one Vladimir Levitsky, who was imprisoned in 1932 for the crime of collecting stamps. Stamp collectors were suspected of trafficking in secret signs

and codes. In 1937, Levitsky was shot at a labor camp called Olkhovka, near Krasnoyarsk.

Memorial has expanded in intent and practice over the years, becoming not only a research center, with libraries and archives around the country and a virtual library on the Gulag system, but also an important locus for human-rights work. It sponsors essay and outreach programs for schools. Sometimes, Memorial feels the pressure of officialdom. In 2008, police broke into its St. Petersburg offices and confiscated twelve hard drives that included an archive on Stalin, representing decades of work. The director there, Irina Flige, said it was an act of intimidation. Six months later, the courts told the police to return the hard drives.

One of Memorial's founders is a historian named Arseny Roginsky, whose father died in Stalin's prisons. Roginsky attracted the notice of the K.G.B. in Leningrad when, in the seventies, he started collecting a kind of proto-archive of documents about Soviet repression; in the early eighties, he was sent to a prison camp for four years.

I had coffee with Roginsky, whom I've known for years, at Memorial's old headquarters, a less antiseptic set of offices, where the entry hall is plastered with photographs of heroic figures of the dissident era, and where Roginsky is allowed to smoke. Sitting in, and sometimes pacing, his minuscule office, Roginsky told me that the past few years have seen a proliferation of independent human-rights groups, media outlets, think tanks, academic departments, election watchdogs, and N.G.O.s not only in Moscow and St. Petersburg but all over the country. Because their efficacy is so limited, so circumscribed by the Kremlin, they do not constitute a true civil society; rather, they are an archipelago of islands in a vast sea, barely connected to each other and ignored, at best, by the political élite.

"To speak in a grandiloquent way about it, this whole process is about shaping civil society," Roginsky said. "This is more important even than whatever we accomplish in human-rights cases or in the study of history. In this country, we have a lot of state

and very little society. Our task is to make it so that there is more society and less state.”

Since the mid-nineties, Russia has been fighting a war against insurgents in Chechnya and throughout the North Caucasus. Memorial has been in the lead among the organizations collecting information on human-rights violations committed by Chechen insurgents, Russian military authorities, and the pro-Moscow government. Memorial was a crucial source of information for the journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who published horrifying reports in the Russian opposition newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*. For her countless articles on torture, illegal detentions, and the reign of terror under Chechnya's ruthless and flagrantly corrupt President, Ramzan Kadyrov, Politkovskaya endured harassment, mock execution, and poisoning. “You're an enemy, to be shot,” Kadyrov told her, in 2004. Two years later, she was gunned down in Moscow.

I met Politkovskaya several times, usually when she was winning awards in the West for her bravery. When, shortly after her death, one of her best sources and a close friend, Memorial's Natalya Estemirova, came to New York to speak at an event commemorating Politkovskaya, I interviewed her onstage. Estemirova spoke movingly of their hair-raising trips around Chechnya. For months afterward, I worried about her; she was determined to go home to Grozny, the Chechen capital, and continue her work for Memorial, investigating kidnappings and extrajudicial executions by the Russian military and by Kadyrov's soldiers. In July, 2009, Estemirova was kidnapped in Grozny. Her body was found in the neighboring region of Ingushetia; she had been shot in the head and chest. Neither murder has been solved.

Along with Tanya Lokshina, an indefatigable visitor to the region for Human Rights Watch, I went to Memorial's newer office to speak with the head of its human-rights efforts, Oleg Orlov, who had been sued by Kadyrov for defamation after Orlov publicly blamed him for Estemirova's murder. Orlov described how the authorities made it nearly impossible for lawyers and human-rights workers in the region to do their jobs.

On the eve of a protest in Ingushetia, in 2007, Orlov went to the city of Nazran, fully aware that the next day the authorities would crush the protest. “The city was flooded with Army and police,” he recalled. “I met the family of a leading member of the opposition, and probably I was spotted there. People were watched very closely. I stayed in the most obvious place, the Hotel Assa. It has armed guards twenty-four seven. Two deputy ministers from the Interior Ministry, Russian, were there with their own guard. In other places in Ingushetia, insurgents murdered Russians. At around eleven, I was in my hotel room typing on my computer. There was a knock on the door. There were voices. I opened the door and there were three gun barrels pointed at me, by huge guys with black masks. They knocked me down. I thought they were carrying out a sweep operation, hunting down insurgents who were at the hotel. I said, ‘Guys, you are mistaken, I have a Memorial I.D.’ They simply destroyed the door of the closet. The senior guy said, ‘Put all his things into a bag.’ I was lying on the floor and still able to see all my stuff thrown into a plastic bag. They tied it up. I tried to protest, telling them my rights. They were hitting me.

“Then I realized it was no mistake. They picked me off the floor and I realized it was an abduction. Many times in my life, I had covered such things, so I knew the algorithm. It went exactly by the scheme I remembered from our human-rights reports in the field. There was a hood over my head. No shoes. They drag you to some kind of vehicle. Then they tell you, ‘Everything will be all right. You will be questioned and then you will be released.’ That's what they always say: ‘Don't make a fuss.’ Three TV journalists were also abducted, and forced into the same car. Someone said, ‘The mopping up of the hotel is completed.’ And the car moved on.

“The decent road ended, and now we were bouncing up and down. I realized no one is going to question us. I thought, ‘They'll bring us to some sort of cell. They said very little but spoke in Russian without an accent. The car stopped. They opened the doors. They threw us out, and there was an order: ‘Liquidate them with silencers.’ That was an unpleasant, if brief, moment. Then there was an im-

mediate sensation of relief, because they started punching us. If they were going to liquidate us, they wouldn't have beaten us. The hood fell off, and I saw the others were beaten up much worse. Two of them were severely beaten, with concussions, and one had to be hospitalized. Then they stopped. They said, ‘We don't want to see you again in Ingushetia. If you come back, blame yourself for what happens.’ The car drove off. We got to our feet.”

As Orlov finished telling the story, explaining how he made it back to Nazran, I was struck by how utterly cool he was. In this respect, he was just like Politkovskaya, like Estemirova, like Lokshina. I feared for him, even if he didn't fear for himself. Last year, Kadyrov went on Chechen TV to denounce Orlov and Memorial. “They are not opponents,” Kadyrov said. “They are traitors. They betrayed the idea of the motherland and the nation.” Orlov was reading to me off his computer. “They get huge salaries from the West,” Kadyrov went on. “They publish ugly things on the Internet about [Chechnya] to get their money. They are not my opponents. They are enemies of the people, enemies of the law and the state.” *Enemies of the people*. This was Stalinist language, and yet Orlov was ironic, unfazed.

A couple of years ago, at another benefit dinner in New York, I met an honoree from the North Caucasus named Nadira Isayeva. As she received her award and spoke modestly about her dangerous work as a journalist in Dagestan, just east of Chechnya, for the newspaper *Chernovik* (“rough draft”), I couldn't have been alone in wondering about her longevity. We met in Moscow a couple of weeks ago. Isayeva is in her early thirties and was wearing the hijab. She is married to a Salafi Muslim who had called her from prison on a smuggled phone to express his admiration for her work. In 2008, she and three colleagues were indicted for “inciting hostility” and for defaming Russia's Federal Security Service and local law enforcement.

Dagestan is less draconian than Chechnya, Isayeva told me one afternoon at the Human Rights Watch office in Moscow. In Chechnya, your life is in danger; in Dagestan, the authorities spread damaging personal rumors about you online. She is seeing, even at *Chernovik*, a

degree of self-censorship. "Everything that touches on law-enforcement agencies, either they are silent about or they publish something perfunctory, just to be sure they mention it," she said. "We became akin to a Soviet-era paper." Meanwhile, her sources are at the breaking point. "These human-rights activists in the Caucasus are drowning," she said. "They have become very vulnerable."

This summer, Isayeva won the defamation case but left *Chernovik* in the wake of a defamation campaign waged against her. Her husband is imprisoned in northern Russia. She says he was arrested on trumped-up charges of robbery, and she doesn't know when she'll be permitted to see him again. She is considering taking a four-month research fellowship in New York, where she will try to think about what options she has in the North Caucasus. "I can basically see how this information arena in the Caucasus is shrinking, and when that happens it usually results in some bloodshed," she said. "I think that I do have the potential to make a difference, to reopen that space. But it's impossible to do it just locally."

While journalists like Isayeva have a vocational sense of mission, there are perfectly ordinary people in Putin's Russia who find themselves wandering into a life of activism, as if by accident. In the summer of 2007, a diminutive businesswoman named Yevgenia Chirikova was walking with her husband in an oak wood near Sheremetyevo Airport called Khimki Forest. She saw that many of the trees were marked with red paint. When she returned home, she scanned various Web sites, and learned that the government had contracted to cut a huge swath through the forest's swamps and floodplains, felling thousands of old oaks, to make way for a new highway between Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Until then, Chirikova had been serenely upwardly mobile, concentrating on her small engineering company and her growing family. She enjoyed her walks in Khimki Forest, part of a greenbelt around the capital. "I didn't know about the situation with Putin," she said. "I wasn't political. I was lazy." Now she realized that if she didn't raise her voice the trees in the forest would fall with barely a sound.

Chirikova, who looks like a homier

Jean Seberg, turned out to be a charismatic civic leader, making effective speeches, keeping up active Web sites and Twitter feeds, and relentlessly drawing attention to the issue. As she organized demonstrations and acts of disobedience in Khimki Forest—members of her group set up a camp there and regularly thrust themselves in front of bulldozers, getting themselves arrested, and even beaten—she learned that the oligarch most closely connected to the project was Arkady Rotenberg, Putin's friend and judo coach. She also discovered that local officials and Vinci, the French construction firm that was doing much of the work, were supremely uninterested in her movement's argument that the highway could easily be built without doing damage to the forest. "The letters I got back boiled down to this: If it's a federal project, then it's legal," she said.

Mikhail Beketov, a crusading editor with the local paper, *Khimkinskakya Pravda*, wrote a series of columns about the corruption of local authorities and the highway deal. After Beketov called on those authorities to resign, his car was blown up. Then, in November of 2008, he was beaten by thugs so savagely that he was in a coma for weeks. He lost three fingers and a leg, and was left unable to walk or speak.

This spring, officials declared that Chirikova, who now had two daughters, was an unfit mother. She feared that she would lose the girls, who are five and ten years old, to a state-run orphanage. "The authorities came to my place, and showed me an anonymous complaint, as in Stalin's time, where it says I beat my kids and was not feeding them properly," she said. "I knew they could throw me in jail and take my children away. I thought, Whom can I turn to? The state authorities would not help me. I felt I could only count on people, and so I made a video address and put it up online. After that, the ombudsman on the rights of children apologized. And we gained even more support. People who were indifferent to ecological causes suddenly sympathized with a woman who'd been threatened with the loss of her children."

The day I saw her, Chirikova was scurrying from one meeting about Khimki to the next, but she had no illusions about the fate of the forest. Countless

trees would come down. The road would be built. Fortunes would be made. The real importance of the movement was its very existence and what it represented. "Civil society is very young," she said. "The Khimki Forest movement has united people of different kinds to stand up for their rights. That influences other movements and other people."

Even before the December 4th elections, Chirikova could sense some anxiety in the "tandem" leadership of Putin and Medvedev. "The authorities are fully conscious of the fact that they are thieves, and they are not so sure of themselves," she said. "Which is why they are scared of any protest. In August last year, we gathered thousands of people near the Kremlin. The authorities are afraid people will turn their heads to the Kremlin. They are ready to do anything they can to prevent people coming out in the streets."

The streets—the highways, the boulevards, and the crooked lanes of Moscow—are, in fact, one of the unlikely stages of civil protest in Putin's Russia. Kutuzovsky Prospect is one of the main avenues on which government officials and the super-rich commute between the center of town and the multimillion-dollar estates of Rublyovka. Out in those monied woods are exquisite restaurants, spas, and showrooms for Bentley, Ferrari, Mercedes, and Maserati. Traffic is horrendous from morning till night. And so officials and the well-connected circumvent the halted condition of mortals by obtaining flashing blue lights for the tops of their cars, a signal that forces everyone to get out of the way, as if for an ambulance. The official blue flashers, called *migalki*, are often acquired through bribes. And the fantastically reckless driving that goes along with them leads to constant accidents—invariably with much smaller, more vulnerable, civilian automobiles.

Nothing could be more maddening, especially for Russian men, who see their cars as a sign of making it. To be pulled over or to be overtaken is humiliating. Thanks to YouTube and the tactics of flash mobs, a group of furious road warriors started putting blue plastic children's buckets on their cars—a spontaneous movement that became known as the Society of Blue Buckets. When members discovered that Nikita Mikhaïlov, a

well-known film director, had a car with a *migalka*, they lambasted him online.

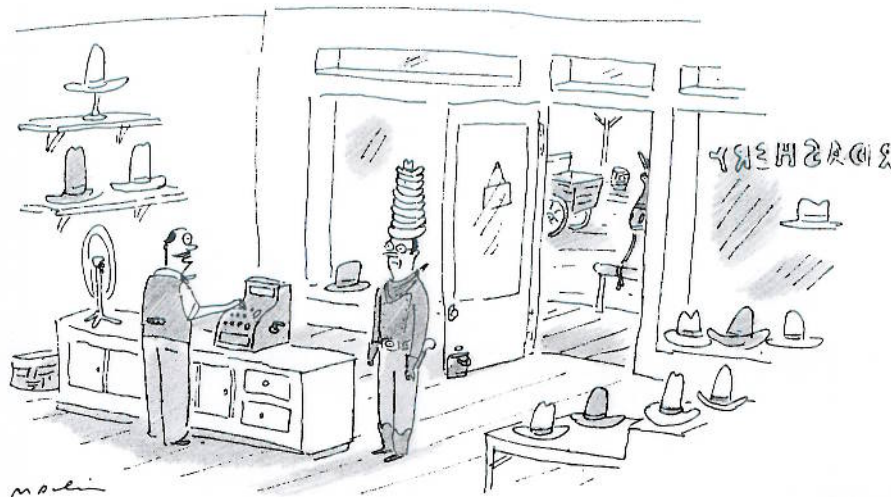
Ivan Alexeyev, a.k.a. Noize MC, is a hugely famous twenty-six-year-old hip-hop artist in Russia who made much of his reputation rebelling against the entitled class of limo riders. Alexeyev grew up near Smolensk, listening to Nirvana, Rage Against the Machine, and Run-DMC. He went to Moscow for college, to study computer science, and he formed his band there, with classmates.

Last year, while he was on tour in the Russian Far East, he heard about an accident near Gagarin Square, in Moscow: a Mercedes bearing a vice-president of one of the major Russian oil companies, Lukoil, smashed into a Citroën, killing two women, including the sister of one of Alexeyev's friends. The police blamed the driver of the Citroën, but eyewitnesses said that the executive's car had been driving in the wrong lane, to avoid traffic.

That night, in Vladivostok, Alexeyev couldn't sleep, and he wrote a howl of outrage, called "Mercedes S666." The song, and the "South Park"-style video that went with it, was a big hit on the Internet. "Right away, a lot of political parties tried to use it for their aims," Alexeyev told me. "It feels like you always have to choose one or the other, and I don't want to choose."

Alexeyev has performed songs mocking Russian skinheads and Nashi, the pro-Putin youth group. At a concert in the city of Volgograd, last July, he sang a song about police corruption called "Smoke Bamboo" and made remarks from the stage mocking the Volgograd police for being aggressive. "To be honest, my behavior wasn't very good, but their reaction was even worse," Alexeyev told me. He was arrested and jailed for ten days.

The most famous prisoner in Russia is Mikhail Khodorkovsky, an oil baron who became the richest man in the country and then, in defiance of Putin's warnings, dared to get involved in politics. Khodorkovsky's arrest, in 2003, followed by two ludicrous show trials and imprisonment in the Far East, was Putin's most blatant demonstration of power to the class of oligarchs that had made its fortune in the legal vacuum of the nineties. Khodorkovsky's case is widely discussed in Moscow, but he is hardly the only businessman in jail. The authoritarian code of



"Our customers usually buy the ten-gallon hat.
You're the first to buy ten one-gallon hats"

the Putin era demands loyalty to the regime and compliance with corrupt law-enforcement officials. Any gesture of rebellion can lead to abrupt visits from the tax police, intimidation, appropriation of property, and, ultimately, trumped-up criminal charges.

Most Wednesday nights, a group of at least fifty people meet in a downtown café. The name of the group is Rus Sidyaschaya ("Russia behind bars") and its leader is a dynamo named Olga Romanova, a former television journalist for REN-TV, and now a writer for *Novaya Gazeta*. Everyone in the group either has been in prison or has a relative in jail or living somewhere cold and unpleasant in internal exile. "Some are well-to-do, some are uneducated, but they all need support and information," Romanova told me. "They are lost in an unjust system." Romanova's husband, Alexei Kozlov, a developer in his thirties, was arrested three years ago. He was first held in a cell in Butyrka, one of the most notorious prisons in Moscow, and then sent to the Perm region, near the Ural Mountains.

In a remarkable article published this year in *Novaya Gazeta*, Romanova said that the source of her husband's troubles was likely a critical story she did for the Russian magazine *The New Times* about one of Moscow's oligarchs. Kozlov's business partner was a former senator named Vladimir Slutzker, who knew the oligarch. Slutzker told Kozlov, "Now, listen, either you divorce your wife or you and

I go our separate ways." Kozlov refused to be threatened, and split up with his business partner instead. Not long afterward, in June, 2008, Kozlov was arrested, charged with money laundering and with the fraudulent purchase of shares in an artificial-leather factory. Romanova and Kozlov believe that Slutzker conspired to have the charges brought.

While in detention, Kozlov managed to phone Romanova and tell her, "There is an envelope in the drawer. Open it and see what's in there." The envelope contained the business card of a high-ranking government official, who had promised to play the role of go-between with the prosecutor in case of arrest. A note was attached saying that Kozlov and the official had agreed on a price: one and a half million dollars. Anticipating arrest, Kozlov had mortgaged his vacation house. When Romanova met the official, she said, in her account for *Novaya Gazeta*, the price for getting the case dropped doubled. She borrowed the extra money from thirty friends. But suddenly, she recalled for the paper, "the man from the business card left his job and disappeared."

Romanova started forking out huge bribes, thousands of dollars at a time, for notarized documents, flea repellent, nail clippers—any item that could ease her husband's stay in Butyrka. After six months without seeing her husband, she managed to slip a bribe to a prison priest. "They have their own church at the Butyrka prison," she said. "The church elder

arranged our meetings. My husband said he was going to confession, and I used the pass of a member of a church choir to get into Butyrka."

Romanova said that, before this crisis, both she and her husband were spoiled. She agonized over which beach resort to visit on holidays, and her husband would have a tantrum in a hotel "because of the fluffiness of the towels." Now they surprised each other with their devotion: Kozlov refused to admit to wrongdoing in order to get out of prison, and Romanova did everything she could to embarrass a rotten judicial system. She visited him at every opportunity in Perm, kept the case public, at great risk, and helped him start an online prison diary. "It's hard for someone who's never been in prison to understand it," Kozlov said. Because they had caused so much public uproar about the case, she started to make headway on her appeals. Kozlov was released this fall. The support group continues. As she says, "This must be how civil society begins; it grows from deep inside you."

This month, Russians will commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the collapse of the Soviet Union with almost universal silence. Ukrainians, Balts, Georgians, Armenians, Azeris, and even the citizens of the most repressive of the Central Asian republics will mark their emergence from the Soviet yoke. They will retell their narratives of oppression and independence. But in Russia, where nationalists, Communists, liberals, and other citizens cannot agree on a narrative of national founding or purpose, and where most see 1991 as a loss, there will be no holiday, no parades, no speeches. Only the most unruly outlets of the Russian media will rehearse the myriad economic, political, ideological, and social factors that led to the erosion and fall of the Soviet Union. As a state, modern Russia began with no commonly held values; it was founded in a charged atmosphere of collapse, rebellion, and almost unimaginable improvisation and contingency.

Such were the last days of the Soviet Union. There is now a trove of material about it, including the numerous memoirs of the political figures of the era—not least the two-volume diary of Anatoly Chernyaev, Gorbachev's loyal, if gimlet-eyed, Sancho Panza. Chernyaev's real-time account of the last weeks of the

drama, in 1991, and particularly the epochal struggle for power between Gorbachev, the vain and humiliated Soviet President, and Boris Yeltsin, the vindictive, popularly elected leader of the Russian republic, is the stuff of Shakespeare—but with vodka, interesting profanity, and nuclear launch codes.

On December 3rd, Chernyaev recalls, Gorbachev phoned Yeltsin. In a few days, Yeltsin was travelling to Belarus, to meet with the Belarusian leader, Stanislau Shushkevich, and the Ukrainian leader, Leonid Kravchuk. Yeltsin, sounding tipsy, talked about the idea of a four-way confederation consisting of Belarus, Ukraine, Russia, and Kazakhstan. Gorbachev could see that this formulation meant an effective end to the Soviet Union and to his own political career.

"In that case, I'll resign," Gorbachev replied. "I'm not going to hang around like a piece of shit in an ice hole."

On December 7th, Yeltsin arrived in Belarus with his aides and twenty guards. A caravan of cars ferried him to the Viskuli mansion, in Belovezhskaya Pushcha, a primeval forest near the Polish border where Leonid Brezhnev used to go hunting. Despite Gorbachev's efforts, the Soviet Union was already unravelling. The Ukrainians had recently declared their independence, and Kravchuk, who had initially supported the K.G.B.-led August coup against Gorbachev, was eager to be free of Moscow. Shushkevich, a modest former nuclear scientist, had been in power for less than three months, but he, too, was in favor of independence. By the time of the meeting, all of Russia's fellow-republics except Kazakhstan had voted in favor of independence.

At dinner, Yeltsin brandished a document drafted by Gorbachev calling for a new all-union agreement. "If you sign it, I'll sign it," Yeltsin told the others. He got the answer he wanted. No one wanted any part of a union, no matter how reformed.

After toasting each other more than once with the local variety of herbal vodka,



the principals went off to celebrate their daring at a local bathhouse, while their aides went to work drafting a new arrangement. In short order, the aides came up with the wording: "We, the People of Belarus, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine, as originators of the U.S.S.R. on the basis of the Union Treaty of 1922, confirm that the U.S.S.R., as a subject of international law and a geopolitical reality, ceases its existence." The aides then drafted a proposal for a successor entity, the Commonwealth of Independent States. It would have no ministries, no taxes, no President, no citizenship, and no real power.

In the morning, Yeltsin, Kravchuk, and Shushkevich ate fried eggs and black bread, while Yevgenia Pateychuk, a secretary hired by the local K.G.B., finished the typing.

The group threw together an official-seeming signing ceremony, including a few local journalists. Valery Drozdov, the deputy editor of the Belarus paper *Narodnaya Volya*, took note of the time at which the three men signed the death certificate of the Soviet Union: 2:17 P.M., Sunday, December 8, 1991. Champagne was served. As Yeltsin wrote in his published diary, "I well remember how a sensation of freedom and lightness suddenly came over me." Pateychuk, the typist, recalled that she had done her job in a fog: "Understanding came later, in a day or two." "In her village of Kamenyuki twelve miles away," the Irish journalist Conor O'Clery writes, in his book on 1991, "she became known as the woman who destroyed the Union."

Before bothering to notify Gorbachev of the epochal news, Yeltsin called President George H. W. Bush, in Washington, leaving the job of calling Gorbachev to the junior partner, Shushkevich. Gorbachev, furious, asked, "What happens to me?" That much was obvious. On Christmas night, he resigned, and the red flag over the Kremlin came down, never to be seen there again.

In 2005, five years after Yeltsin handed over power to him, Putin remarked, "First and foremost, it is worth acknowledging that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the century. For the Russian people, it became a genuine tragedy."

Although he was appointed by Yeltsin, Putin has insisted that all was chaos in

the nineteen-nineties, and that Russians should be grateful for the relative stability and economic dynamism of the past decade. That the country has grown far less free, he implies, is the necessary price. As a way to justify a prolonged term in office, Putin and his handlers suggest that he be placed in the same category as nation rebuilders like Franklin Roosevelt, Helmut Kohl, and Lee Kuan Yew, who led Singapore for more than thirty years. In terms of Russian history, Putin compares himself not to Peter the Great, the Westernizing tsar, but, rather, to Pyotr Stolypin (1862-1911), the iron-fisted economic reformer of the pre-revolutionary period. It was Stolypin who said, "Give me twenty years of calm, and I will reform Russia." And, "You want great upheavals, we want a great Russia." As Masha Lipman, an analyst at the Moscow Carnegie Center, told me, Putin has surely demanded stability—even through the curtailment of political rights—but "where are the reforms?" She added that in Soviet-era schools Stolypin was remembered mainly for the "Stolypin wagons," the railway cars that carried imprisoned radicals to Siberia, and the "Stolypin necktie," the noose with which political prisoners were hanged.

The authoritarian features of the Putin era, however, are not like those of either tsarist or Soviet times. "Today's power is very rational," Arseny Roginsky, of Memorial, said. "Power today doesn't shut everyone up. There is freedom of expression and speech. There are shelves of anti-Putin books in the stores. This is no longer the eighteenth century. A book with a printing of a thousand copies will not topple this state." A strong hand on state television suffices, at least for now. The current system of stability, with its elimination of authentic politics—its cultivation of phony elections and a judicial system that largely takes its orders from the executive—is an elaborately flexible, supremely cynical system of vertical power. Putin, a former agent of the security services, is its personification.

The architect of some of the most important features of Putinism—the complicated media structure; the United Russia Party and the pocket opposition; the loyalist youth groups—is a former bohemian, banker, and businessman

named Vladislav Surkov. The Soviet system was a pre-technological attempt to crush any trace of civil society. Surkov, in numerous speeches, has promoted what he calls "sovereign" or "managed" democracy, a postmodern system that includes elements of autocracy, democracy, and sheer brutality. Surkov has no interest in *Homo sovieticus*. He wants to be at once shadowy and cool. In his office, he displays pictures of Tupac Shakur, Joseph Brodsky, and Che Guevara. Before coming to the Kremlin, he worked in private industry—including as an executive under Mikhail Khodorkovsky. He used to write songs for the gothic rock group Agata Kristi. And he is believed to have written, under a pseudonym, a novel called "Almost Zero," about a former bohemian of the nineteen-eighties who becomes a corrupt public-relations man. (The author is one Natan Dubovitsky; Surkov's wife is named Natalya Dubovitskaya.)

If Putinism has an ideological manifesto, it is a 2007 lecture that Surkov delivered, at the Russian Academy of Sciences, entitled "Russian Political Culture: The View from Utopia." The theme, which is pronounced in Putin's rhetoric, is that there is no such thing as universal democracy. Surkov says that the unique immensity of Russia demands uniquely centralized power. He believes that all democracies around the world are in fact managed and hypocritical, and give only the illusion of real freedom. Like Putin, he insists that the West cease its lectures on freedom and human rights. "They tell us about democracy," he said at a press conference in Moscow, "while thinking about our hydrocarbons." At the same time, Surkov is quick to remind liberals that it is only the regime that stands between them and the growing numbers of hard-line Russian nationalists.

At its core, though, Putin's Russia is not a democracy, sovereign or otherwise. Rather, power for power's sake and the accumulation of vast wealth in the hands of various "clans" and friends of the Kremlin are at the center of things. Very few owners of the mansions outside Moscow were able to buy those properties, and hold onto them, without close connections, and complete fealty, to the regime. Power has no interest in civil society, save to co-opt and marginalize it.

When I asked Putin's spokesman,

Dmitri Peskov, if the Prime Minister was disappointed by his steely image abroad, Peskov replied, "This is the way he does things, and this is the way he is going to continue to do things. I don't think he cares what people think about him in the West." Nor does he care that the opposition mocks state television for its slavish adherence to the Kremlin line. "He who pays the piper calls the tune," Peskov said.

What both Putin and Surkov find insufferable is any hint of what they see as criticism or interference from the United States or Europe. A few days before the Duma elections, the government started cracking down on the most effective election-monitoring N.G.O. in the country, Golos ("voice"). At the mention of this, Peskov lost his good cheer. "We have special services, and we have all the data about N.G.O.s being sponsored by foreign states."

Putin does not like being lectured to, does he? I asked.

A smile returned to the spokesman's lips. "Actually, I was coming here in the car listening to the radio," he said. "Do you know what was the first item on the news? The State Department of the United States expressed its gravest concern about the policy in Russia toward gays!" Peskov was referring to proposed legislation in St. Petersburg that would prohibit "propaganda of sodomy, lesbianism, bisexuality, and transgenderism to minors." He was in stitches now. "I thought, What is the State Department of the United States doing? With their national debt! With their collapsing economy! With a leak of industry in the country because everything is in a financial bubble! With a nightmare in Afghanistan! With a nightmare in Iraq! With a nightmare in the global economy! And they have a deep concern about gays in Russia. Ha! Ha! So I was really in a very good mood because of this!"

A week before the election, I had lunch at the airy downtown apartment of Lyudmilla Alexeeva, the chairman of the Moscow Helsinki Group and one of the great veterans of the human-rights movement. She is eighty-four, but she is a regular visitor to the Internet, and she keeps up with news about civil-action groups around the country: a movement in Bryansk demanding more

kindergartens, a woman in Komi who used social media to gather support for a school for autistic children. Such movements never make it to state television, but they live online—fascinating, promising, if atomized.

“I think that these elections are the last elections that will be controlled by television, and the next elections will be under the influence of the Internet,” she said.

Last February, after the uprising in Tahrir Square, Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin revealed the Kremlin’s anxiety about the Internet. “Look what they have done in Egypt, those highly placed managers of Google,” he told the *Wall Street Journal*. Some officials in Putin’s circles have studied how China’s Communist Party bureaucracy has succeeded, through filtering systems, in blocking at least some critical material online. On the other hand, the authorities realize that at least forty million Russians are already online, with tens of millions more to come—and many of them are well educated, and perhaps less willing to tolerate curbs on their Internet browsing than, say, human-rights abuses in prisons or in faraway Chechnya and Dagestan. As it happened, on Election Day, Sunday, December 4th, a range of opposition Web sites—The New Times, Echo of Moscow, Bolshoi Gorod, slon.ru, Kommersant, and the site for the vote-monitoring group Golos—were shut down by cyber attacks.

Not long before, I had had breakfast with “Sasha” and “Masha,” the young anonymous creators of the Twitter feed KermlinRussia, a parody of Dmitri Medvedev’s Twitter feed KremlinRussia. (Medvedev first tweeted from Twitter’s headquarters, in San Francisco, last June—an errant attempt to give himself a post-authoritarian glamour.) They mock Medvedev’s dullness and, more, the entire system’s attempt to hold together a glitzy, modern, but ultimately corrupt authoritarianism.

Sasha and Masha asked that they not be identified by their real names. He works in public relations, she in finance. They are well-dressed, travel, earn good salaries, and admit that they live “double lives.” They both realize that in their professional lives proximity to power is everything, and to spurn that system openly is to give up everything.

Sasha, in his early tweets, focussed on the fantastic privileges of the rich and the powerful. “I don’t understand all this talk of hours-long traffic jams,” he tweeted, aping Medvedev. “Personally, I always get to the Kremlin from Rublyovka in 10-15 minutes.” Masha’s tweets are more literary and cultural in tone, alluding to everything from the films of Sergei Eisenstein to pop music. Sasha and Masha started their Web careers as commenters on the ironical, oppositional invitation-only site called Leper Zone. They never get their news from television, preferring sites like gazeta.ru, slon.ru, and vedomosti.ru, and the tabloid *Lifenews*.

“When the powers that be check into the Internet, they hear everything, but they don’t listen,” Masha told me. “Twitter is the most interactive of all the platforms.” KermlinRussia, she said, “is a model of a civil-society entity, an example of one, but it is extremely isolated.”

Their fear is that after the March Presidential elections Putin will put more pressure on civil-society organizations and on the Internet. A wounded, angry Putin will not be a pretty thing. Last week, Yevgenia Chirikova, the leader of the Khimki Forest movement, was strip-searched by border guards out in the open at Sheremetyevo Airport—a two-and-a-half-hour episode of pure harassment. “Medvedev played with openness,” Sasha said, “and now Dad will come home and make everyone clean their room.”

The outcome of the Duma elections was a severe disappointment to the Kremlin. United Russia scored, according to official estimates, around forty-nine and a half per cent, a sharp drop from the sixty-four per cent it won four years ago. Because of reports of widespread fraud, most assumed that the real figures were much lower. The election was stolen, surely, but ineffectively and without much conviction. The Communist Party, which has long had a deeply nationalist tinge, did well, with twenty per cent. The night after the balloting, more than five thousand people turned out for a rally in downtown Moscow, chanting “Putin is a thief!” and “Russia without Putin!” Police detained hundreds of protesters, including the blogger and activist Alexei Navalny. The rallies continued for three days.

This was hardly Tahrir Square, of course. Demographically, Russia is a much older, far more fully employed society; its vast and unique geography, to say nothing of the determination of the regime, makes such an uprising far more difficult to conceive. Much of the middle class is still more interested in prosperity than in law or democracy. For many Russians, the experience of the nineties under Yeltsin, with its lawlessness, economic instability, and wild privatization, was so disorienting, so disappointing, that they forgot about the new freedoms they had gained and came to refer to the period not as *demokratiya* but as *dermokratiya* (“shitocracy”). And yet now something really was changing; there was a distinct shift in mood.

At Memorial, I met with Sergei Kovalyov, a biophysicist who was Andrei Sakharov’s protégé in the human-rights movement. Kovalyov is a former political prisoner, and was, briefly, an adviser to Boris Yeltsin, until they parted over the war in Chechnya. Kovalyov is eighty-one. He wryly said he knows that he is considered “naïve” in the West, “an elderly village idiot who actually thinks it is possible to comply with human-rights obligations and not to lie in politics, and who thinks that law is not an instrument of politics but the other way around.”

He said that while all the groups and movements and Web sites we discussed could not really be called civil society—not without proper constitutional protections, in a truly democratic system—they did give him grounds for “modest optimism.” The situation, no matter how deeply discouraging at times, reminded him of the moment when water, though extremely cold, is still liquid—and then, suddenly, with the addition of a single crystal, changes form, turning into ice.

“At some point, this phase transition will happen quite quickly,” Kovalyov said. “Of course, people will always ask when. I am no prophet, and I used to say, ‘Wait another fifteen years.’ But now fifteen years has come and gone. The phase transition is still not here.” ♦

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