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Putin's supporters rally in Red Square to celebrate the election outcome.



## RUSSIA

# The Great and Powerful Putin

After two terms as president, Vladimir Putin plans his next moves

By Alastair Gee

**M**OSCOW—It is in the nature of politics that as a president heads into his final months in office, his power ebbs and he becomes a lame duck. That most definitely is not the case, however, for Russia's president, Vladimir Putin. His term ends in May, but he has never been stronger, thanks to an oil-enriched economy, tough measures to silence his critics, and the recent landslide vote for his United Russia party and its allies—an essentially rigged parliamentary election that was proclaimed a mandate for Putinism. "This vote is not only for United Russia," says Boris Gryzlov, a party leader, "but also for the course taken by President Vladimir Putin."

That course is taking Russia back to the future with a heavy-handed style of Kremlin governance that has restored a sense of order to the lives of Russians, many overwhelmed and impoverished in the turmoil of the immediate post-Communist years. In the seven years since he was elected president, Putin has become an authoritarian figure who curtails political opposition and the free

media as he recasts Russia to his vision. But Russians know they can't eat democracy and, for now, seem content with what Putin has given them: sustained economic growth, improvements in living standards, and renewed international stature. His increasingly assertive foreign policy, seen as a challenge to U.S. dominance, is a source of national pride (editorial, Page 72).

**In charge.** While his second term ends in May, and he is constitutionally barred from running for a third, Putin has signaled that he intends to find a way to retain power. United Russia has hailed the election result as proof Russians want Putin as their "national leader," and Putin earlier suggested he may become prime minister, a post that would most likely come with expanded powers. Another possibility in the wake of the December 2 election: changing the Constitution. The United Russia party won 315 seats in the parliament, 15 more than the two thirds needed to do that. Add in the two Kremlin-allied parties, and Putin effectively controls 393 of the 450 seats (the sole opposition: the Communist Party with 57 seats).

Western observers, as well as Russian opposition groups, decry the election as neither fair nor

free. They point to the Kremlin's heavy use of state-controlled media, harassment of opposition parties, and rules that shut out challengers. The White House was discreet last week in its public criticism, though President Bush said he told Putin in a telephone conversation that "we were sincere in our expressions of concern about the elections."

Russians, though, didn't seem so concerned: The reported 63 percent turnout was the highest for parliamentary elections since the mid-1990s. Putin could have won the vote handily even if he had given a longer leash to opposition parties, but some instincts seem fundamental to the Russian president, an old KGB officer who rose through the ranks of the security services. "The most important KGB idea is that everything has to be under control," says Dmitri Fonarev, who worked in the 1980s as a KGB bodyguard for then Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

**Economic gains.** Still, to the frustration of his reform-oriented opponents, Putin's approval ratings top 80 percent. Part of

that is because he has presided over a strong upturn in the economy. Russians vividly remember the Boris Yeltsin era in the 1990s, when the post-Communist economy collapsed and the country's prime assets were sold at fire-sale prices to Kremlin-connected oligarchs. Corruption is still rampant, but the average monthly wage has increased from \$80 in 2000 to more than \$500 in 2007. The

tougher approach to foreign policy. He rejects Washington's proposed European missile defense system and withdrew in July from the 1990 treaty setting military-force limits in Europe. Moscow opposes new sanctions on Iran and has become more belligerent in claiming Arctic oil and gas resources. Russia, says Nikolai Kuryanovich, a member of the parliament's International Affairs Committee,

will attempt to create a bipolar world and "form alliances with China, India, and east European countries."

At home, sports cars and luxury stores are signs of prosperity that also fuel discontent

over the growing rich-poor gap. Oil revenues are being squandered by corruption, and aged industrial infrastructure badly needs new investment. That's grist for opposition parties, should they ever get a chance to be heard. "We live almost underground," say the writer Eduard Limonov, who leads a movement opposed to Putin with chess champion Gary Kasparov. "There is no politics in Russia now." ●

**Putin's increasingly assertive foreign policy, seen as a challenge to U.S. global dominance, is a source of national pride.**

government, buoyed by record oil and gas revenues, has paid off its foreign debts and accumulated around \$150 billion in an oil revenue fund. "In the '90s, as I walked home from work, the shelves of stores were empty," says Olga Miroshina, 70, a Moscow pensioner who voted for United Russia. "There was nothing to buy but tomato soup. Now, I can go to the stores and buy whatever I want."

Russians are also proud of Putin's

IRAN

# A Little Less of a Menace

An intelligence surprise shifts the debate over Tehran's aims

By Thomas Omestad

The language may have been typically dry and cautious, but this intelligence assessment was a policy blockbuster: U.S. spy agencies collectively judge "with high confidence" that Iran halted its secret nuclear weapons program by the fall of 2003.

The national intelligence estimate reversed a judgment of two years ago and undercut the sense of an urgent, growing Iranian nuclear peril that President Bush in mid-October said had to be eliminated to avoid a "World War III." In a snap, the report broadly complicated the task of persuading Russia, China, and other skeptical countries to back a much tougher round of United Nations sanctions and other financial pressures on Iran. And it mostly stilled hawkish chatter. "The military option is not just off the table; it's out the window," argued Vali Nasr, an

Iran specialist at the Council on Foreign Relations and Tufts University.

**Concerns.** A senior European diplomat agreed, while arguing that concerted diplomatic pressure on Iran to suspend nuclear-fuel work had to continue. The U.S. reversal also caused further damage to the country's credibility on weapons of mass destruction, the diplomat added,

asking, "So is this intelligence right?"

Bush and his advisers contend that their approach has been validated because the NIE shows that Tehran had indeed been secretly striving for a bomb. Bush insisted that "the NIE doesn't do anything to change my opinion about the danger Iran poses to the world."

The document concluded that Iran primarily abandoned its weapons development in response to international pressure and that its actions "are guided by a cost-benefit approach rather than a rush to a weapon." Iran continues its efforts to master the enrichment of uranium—only for civilian nuclear power, Iran says—

though the NIE judged that Iran could be technically capable of making enough highly enriched uranium for a bomb between 2010 and 2015, if it chose to do so.

Israel sees a shorter timeline and is unswayed by the new assessment. To the degree that Washington's military option is now untenable, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's vow that Israel "will not tolerate" a nuclear-armed Iran becomes the new pressure point. "If the Americans don't deal with it," asserts John Pike, director of the think tank [globalsecurity.org](http://globalsecurity.org), "the Israelis will." ●



President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad calls the report a victory for Iran.