

Putin Between Bush and Lukashenko

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is living his De Gaulle moment — a blinding mixture of stupefaction and anger that his country no longer wants him back as president.

Putin refuses to accept that the drumming United Russia suffered in the State Duma elections was in fact a massive vote of protest against his intention to rule this country for another 12 years.

Feeling the nation underappreciates his accomplishments, he is irate at the thought that tens of thousands of relatively well-off Russians who benefited from Putin's stability would go to a protest rally in Moscow to demand change.

Putin has lost touch with the most dynamic group of Russian society — the young and upwardly mobile urban voters who no longer wish to cede to Putin the right to decide the future of their country.

His highly personalized Soviet governing style leaves him increasingly the leader of Russia's

older generations while putting him at odds with the nation's future. Putin was at his cynical best during the televised call-in show Thursday.

But his arrogance and abrasiveness only magnified his detachment from reality and his unwillingness to recognize that the popular protests were centered on his figure and could not be dismissed by insults. He continued to claim the right to make the most important decisions himself.

He now has two paths open to him.

One is the George W. Bush option, where he secures a less than impressive victory in a relatively free and fair presidential vote in March and then proceeds to govern in his usual style. His approval ratings would continue to slide to the bottom, with the public weariness of his rule becoming more and more visible. He would be ridiculed, laughed and whistled at and depart politics peacefully after one six-year term.

The other is the Lukashenko 2010 option, where he imitates a competitive presidential election, which he wins in the first round by a wide margin secured through magical vote counting. He then cracks down hard on his opponents and suppresses public protest. There would be no exit strategy for him after that.

Putin opened the door for the Bush option when he promised "to go away immediately" if he felt "a lack of public support." Let's hope he meant it.

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