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Putin's 3 Choices

By Richard Lourie

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For all the recent tumult in Russia, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is still the most powerful man in the country. The choices he makes now and in the near future will have a significant, even decisive, influence on the fate of the country.

His first choice is to take the suggestion of the protesters who flooded Moscow's streets in December: retire. Unlikely as a real possibility, there are, however, some advantages to early retirement. The term Putin will no doubt win handily in March will be a long, tough six years that could make him old before his time and also make him go down in history as a failure instead of a mixed success. We can assume that he's got sufficient funds stashed away to ensure himself a luxurious retirement and, who knows, maybe there's something else he's always wanted to do.

But Putin is only 59 — and a vigorous 59 at that. And the trouble with the game he's in is that once you lose the position of national leader, there's little else you can do except write your memoirs or run high-minded foundations. And that's clearly not for him.

Another choice is to rise to the challenge of his moment in time and become a true hero of history. Russia is undergoing an interconnected series of crises that, if unresolved, could bring the country to its third collapse after those of 1917 and 1991. Americans worry about decline, Russians about fall.

Many of Russia's problems can begin to be resolved if state control over television is relaxed enough to allow for at least one public broadcasting network, as already promised by President Dmitry Medvedev. In fact, that should be the No. 1 demand of the protesters. It is both more valuable and more attainable than new State Duma elections.

What's more, it could help greatly with two of Russia's other main problems — the lack of genuine opposition parties and a dependent judiciary. New politicians, ideas and platforms could emerge on public television, and the most egregious violations of the law could be subjected to investigative reporting. Other critical issues like the undiversified economy and the failure to create a new national identity can also be addressed. This might be a slow process, but the opposition insists that it wants evolution, not revolution.

Independent television should be not only the opposition's No. 1 priority. It should be the top gauge of Putin's seriousness about reform.

If Putin deals with the country's problems head-on without denying they exist or blaming foreigners for them, he will go down in history as more than long-serving and self-serving. The chances are, however, that he will opt for an approach like that of a statesman he admires — Pyotr Stolypin, Tsar Nicholas II's prime minister, who mixed strict discipline with intelligent reforms, helping the economy steam ahead in the first decade of the 20th century.

But Stolypin was assassinated in 1911, and six years later the Russia he tried to reform no longer existed. In any case, his combination of repression and reform, even if updated, is unlikely to fly at the beginning of the 21st century.

It's also unlikely that Putin's Russia would come to such a spectacularly tragic finale as Nicholas II's. A rising death rate, capital flight, brain drain and computer anarchists would be enough to bring the country to a level of stagnation that would make the Leonid Brezhnev era look peppy by comparison. And in the ever swifter-moving 21st century, that would be an inertia impossible to overcome.

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