

Putin's Final Act

By [Nina Khrushcheva](#)

May 30, 2012



Vladimir Putin's new presidential term is just beginning, but it increasingly looks like the beginning of the end. Whenever Russia's people pour into the streets en masse, as they have been doing since December, from that point on, things never work out well for the authorities.

In March 1917, Tsar Nicholas II had to abdicate in the wake of mass street protests, clearing the way for the Bolshevik Revolution eight months later. In December 1991, the Soviet Union, then seemingly an unbreakable monolith, collapsed in just a few months. In August of that year, hundreds of thousands went into the streets to confront the hard-line coup against Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika.

Now it is Putin's turn. Moscow boasts Occupy Abai, modeled on the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States. Other cities are witnessing protests as well, all echoing the same call: Putin must go.

Russians are famously patient and slow to rebel. And who would blame them? If protests have turned out badly for Russian governments over the centuries, they have ended even more

disastrously for the protesters. In 1917, liberation from absolute monarchy ushered in an even more despotic form of absolutism. After the Soviet collapse in 1991, Boris Yeltsin's unruly privatization reduced millions of people to penury and elevated a corrupt oligarchy into virtual rulership.

But despite being well-aware of their history, once Russians turn on the man at the top, they don't stop until he is out. History debunks Putin's myth that the majority of the country supports him because they want "stability" and that the protests, headed by "Western stooges," are about to subside.

They won't abate. And the appointment of Igor Kholmanskikh, a tank factory foreman who had offered to come to Moscow with a burly cohort of his fellow assembly-line workers to defend Putin's regime, to rule the vast Ural region will not scare them. Soft power has the upper hand today, and tanks can't shut down the Internet.

In nominating his new Cabinet, which Putin deemed so important that he could not attend the Group of Eight summit, Putin's Soviet origins could not be more obvious. Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev used to have his culture and agriculture ministers swap places, as if — bound by the word culture — they were one and the same field of expertise. Putin's new Cabinet is a similar reshuffling of the incompetent with the unqualified.

This debunks another myth: that Putin, now back in charge, will abandon his vulgar anti-Western rhetoric and become a reformer, understanding that only a democratic Russia can maintain its territorial integrity and sovereignty. And the reason that he won't embrace reform is that he can't, because that old truism "absolute power corrupts absolutely" has proved itself once more. After more than a decade in power, Russia's leaders are no longer capable of pursuing better policies. Their personal interests — and wealth — are too dependent on maintaining the status quo.

Of course, Russia has seen this pattern before as well. I will never forget what my great-grandmother Nina used to say about the corrupting nature of power in our own family: "Regrettably, the Khrushchev of 1962 wasn't the Khrushchev of 1956." My great-grandfather denounced Stalin's cult of personality, only to be worshipped — for example, in the over-the-top 1961 documentary "Our Nikita Sergeevich" — for his "super vision" of how to diminish imperialism and "catch up with West."

Khrushchev's self-eulogizing flatly contradicted his earlier de-Stalinization campaign, the point of which was that Stalin betrayed communism by doing all that he could to resemble the royals of the past. Everything officially said about him was superior and superlative: "best friend of Soviet athletes," "father of all children on Earth," etc. That is the bombastic language of absolute monarchy.

Yeltsin, on assuming office as Russia's leader in 1990, denounced all nomenklatura privileges as his first order of business. In his book "A Confession," he wrote, "As long as [Russians] are so poor and dismal, I can't eat sturgeon and caviar, I can't race cars, ignoring traffic lights, I can't take imported super-pills, knowing that a neighbor has no aspirin for a child. Because I am ashamed." But when he left the Kremlin in 2000, his secret fortune, from real estate, yachts, horses and other properties, was estimated to be worth at least \$15 million.

In January 2000, the novice President Putin gave a slew of persuasive interviews to Russian television stations, praising the rule of law and promising not to remain in office a day beyond his two constitutional terms or if he lost popular support. These are the "rules of the game, of democracy," he said.

After two presidential terms, followed by a stint as prime minister and now a third presidency, Putin is entering his 13th year in power with 40 percent of the population desperately wanting him out. If history is any indication, that number will only grow.

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