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Putin's Regime Won't Collapse Anytime Soon

By Alexei Bayer

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Russia has never been a normal country, but lately things have been getting a little too odd even by Russia's own standards.

The government has responded to public protests against corruption, incompetence and lack of legitimacy by flaunting those very qualities. It blatantly rigged parliamentary and presidential elections and then gave medals to those who did the rigging. It threw protesters and opposition figures in prison on trumped-up charges and rushed repressive, unconstitutional laws through the rubber-stamp State Duma. Even as the global economic situation becomes increasingly unstable, it continues to blithely waste public funds, ignoring alarming trends in international prices for oil and gas, Russia's main export commodities. Pilfering at all levels of government continues on a massive scale.

Two recent events epitomized this theater of the absurd: the trial of three young women from the Pussy Riot punk band for staging a performance at a Moscow church and the flood

in the southern city of Krymsk in which a still-undetermined number of people died. National disasters have started to occur this year even before the advent of August, a traditionally difficult month for the country.

A screw seems to be seriously loose within the government structure. Today's Russia is a surreal place that seems to have emerged from the pages of 19th-century satirists Nikolai Gogol and Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin. It is a rogues' gallery of venal bureaucrats, lying politicians, sanctimonious priests, shifty businessmen, cops on the take and citizens pining away for the strong arm of Stalin. They are comic as literary caricatures but pathetic as the face of a nation.

With the government acting in an irrational and self-destructive manner, quite a few political commentators in Russia have concluded that President Vladimir Putin's regime, which appropriately enough will mark its 13th anniversary in August, is on its last legs. Unfortunately, they are mistaken.

In 1974, when I left the Soviet Union, I voraciously read the literature put out by the original White Russian emigres who had escaped the Bolshevik Revolution. Strangely, throughout the Soviet period they were convinced that the Communist system was too perverted to survive for long. There was even a funny story about an exile from Petrograd who, upon arriving to Paris, refused to unpack his bags because he expected to go home soon.

Countless studies, books and journal articles were written by learned authors analyzing the inherent bankruptcy of the Communist economic theory, the foolishness of an atheist campaign in a pious country and the self-destructive nature of collectivization. The starvation of the early 1930s was sure to topple the regime, they proclaimed. When the Bolsheviks began purging each other, it was taken as a sign of a terminal crisis. The killing of top Red Army brass was seen as the swan song of the Bolsheviks. And so on, through Nikita Khrushchev's campaign to plant corn beyond the Arctic Circle and the decades of Leonid Brezhnev's senility.

In the end, the Soviet regime did collapse, but it took 80 years, not a few months as the White emigres had originally expected. Besides, it didn't perish because of the truculence or incompetence of its leaders. On the contrary, communism crumbled only when Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, overwhelmed by the surreal idiocy of its ideology and astonishing economic failures, decided to make the Soviet system a little more normal.

So never fear. As long as no one in the current Russian government attempts any reforms, the system is likely to endure for the remainder of Putin's natural life and beyond.

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