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Power Without Purpose

By Nina Khrushcheva

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For more than two decades, August has been the cruelest month for Russian leaders. The August 1991 coup led to the departure of President Mikhail Gorbachev and the end of the Soviet Union. The August 1998 debt default and ruble collapse laid waste to President Boris Yeltsin's free-market reforms and resulted in the sacking of his prime minister, Sergei Kiriyenko.

The following August, a sick and feeble Yeltsin announced that Vladimir Putin, the fourth prime minister in a year, would soon take over as president. Four years later, in August 2003, a Kremlin-inspired tax raid against Russia's leading oligarch, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, followed by the confiscation of his oil company, Yukos, demonstrated what Putin meant by the "dictatorship of law."

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This late-summer curse now precedes a "December of misery" — at least for democracy activists. In December 2011, mass protests against Putin's election-fixing and upcoming third presidential term simply fizzled out. Likewise, December 2013 was full of omens.

The month began with international calls to boycott February's Winter Olympics in Sochi in protest against a Kremlin-sanctioned law banning "gay propaganda." This was followed by political turmoil in neighboring Ukraine, where protesters tried, and once again failed, to topple their anti-democratic leaders. The year ended with two suicide bombings in Volgograd, which claimed dozens of lives. In attacking Volgograd, formerly Stalingrad, the symbol of Soviet wartime perseverance, the terrorists — most likely Islamic fundamentalists — could hardly have picked a more emblematic Russian city.

Moreover, in December, Putin made high-profile use of that most imperial of prerogatives, the presidential pardon, to bestow freedom on, among others, Khodorkovsky, who had spent a decade behind bars, and two members of the protest punk band Pussy Riot. These apparent acts of mercy were presented as the wise acts of a benevolent modern czar ruling in the name of traditional values and repulsed by Western decadence. Never mind that it was Western governments that had pressed most persistently for their release.

Indeed, Putin's real motivation for the pardons had nothing to do with any traditional concept of law and order, much less with a move toward democracy. Rather, by freeing his opponents, he sought to appease foreign critics before the upcoming Olympics. And to some degree, he has succeeded. Despite the transparent self-interest underlying the pardons, his critics are starting to speak of a Putin "thaw."

It appears that sometime last summer, Putin realized that his usual approach to public relations — kissing tigers, "discovering" sunken treasure and bare-chested horseback riding in the Siberian taiga — was hackneyed and inappropriate for a world leader. So, like the good KGB apparatchik that he is, Putin refocused his attention on exploiting his opponents' weaknesses — particularly those of U.S. President Barack Obama. That tactic has been successful, at least insofar as it has created buzz about a "resurgent Russia."

In his now customary New Year's address, a preening Putin celebrated 2013 by recalling how Russia had outplayed the U.S. and Western Europe. Without being too specific, he noted Russia's asylum offer to former U.S. intelligence contractor Edward Snowden last summer; his deal to dispose of Syria's chemical weapons, thereby preventing the U.S. from striking Russia's ally; and Ukraine's return to Russia's sphere of influence after its rejection, under Kremlin pressure, of an association agreement with the European Union.

But as the "inhumane acts of terrorism," as Putin himself put it, in Volgograd demonstrate, tactical victories do not always lead to strategic success. Putin's attempt to pacify the North Caucasus by installing the brutal Ramzan Kadyrov as head of Chechnya has brought little

more than a fragile, largely elusive truce that has left Russia as vulnerable as ever to terrorism.

Even Putin's latest pet project — proving that Russia can host an Olympics as successfully as Beijing or London — could easily backfire. Russia's potential medal haul might generate a national feel-good moment, but only if the Sochi games proceed smoothly and safely. The risk is that the greater their success, the more likely it is that Chechen and other insurgents will seek more targets, at an even more terrible human cost.

By suppressing the opposition in Moscow, Grozny and elsewhere, Putin has only put a lid on a boiling pot. Part of the Kremlin's difficulty stems from its remarkable lack of vision — a fundamental failure to understand what Russia is or can become. We know that it is no longer an economic power, oil reserves notwithstanding. Nor is it a match for the U.S., or even China, in international affairs. But it is far from clear what Russia wants to become: a reinvented empire, a new autocracy, a "sovereign democracy" or perhaps something else.

A century ago, the month of August marked the start of a conflagration in Europe whose catastrophic effects continue to shape Russia. In 1913, simmering imperial tensions in the Balkans seemed to have subsided, and yet 1914 marked the start of the Great War. My hope for 2014 is that Putin's hubris will not lead Russia down a similar road.

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