

Putin In Command

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The terror crisis in Moscow has given President Putin a new lease of political life.

Vladimir Putin is a lucky politician. When he was appointed prime minister of Russia on August 8, 1999 and pronounced the heir to Boris Yeltsin, few believed that the last throw of the dice by the Kremlin entourage would have any success.

However, the raid by Shamil Basayev into Dagestan in the summer of 1999 and the apartment block explosions in Moscow and Volgodonsk two months later created the ideal backdrop for myth-creation and the young hero Vladimir Putin seized the part with alacrity.

But after three years, the Putin myth at last showed signs of wear and tear. His administration has not succeeded in resolving a single serious problem in the economy, the social sphere or in the fight against crime.

The Chechen military campaign had reached a dead end once again and the number of people calling for negotiations and an end to the war had begun to rise. They included such respected luminaries as former prime minister Yevgeny Primakov. For the first time, doubts were being expressed that Putin's re-election in 2004 was not a foregone conclusion.

And now, suddenly, the tragic events in Moscow have, it seems, given new life to the slowly fading Putin myth.

After three days of terrible drama shown live on television, the commander-in-chief gave the order to storm the theatre. When it was all over, he appeared on television and begged the forgiveness of his people.

Opinion polls suggest they were right behind him. Almost no one blames the president for not protecting them against the terrifying attack in Moscow. A survey of 1,600 people conducted by the All-Russia Centre for the Study of Public Opinion, VTsIOM, between October 25 and 28, revealed that 85 per cent of Russians supported Putin's actions during the Moscow hostage crisis. Only ten per cent of respondents characterised them as "poor".

Even the liberal intelligentsia has backed Putin to the hilt. While they still call for reforms and closer relations with the West, they are now also demanding a police state, military trials and a return of the death penalty.

Putin will hardly back all their demands, but the events of the past week have made a big impact on Russian political life.

In the first instance that means a toughening of Moscow's line in the Chechen conflict. Actually, it would be hard to make it tougher in a purely military sense. All types of weapons, including vacuum bombs have been used there already. On October 28, the president made it clear he rules nothing out. "If anyone uses weapons of mass destruction or the equivalent against our country, Russia will respond with measures commensurate with the threat wherever terrorists, the organizers of their crimes, and their ideological and financial supporters might be," Putin said.

In practice a "toughening" of the line in Chechnya will lead merely to more atrocities and crimes during "mop-up operations", which in turn will only increase the number of fighters and potential suicide militants.

The idea of negotiating with Aslan Maskhadov - or anyone Russia is fighting against - will be entirely rejected. This is the case although a majority of Russians had already said they were in favour of negotiations. In the VTsIOM poll, 46 per cent of those surveyed said that Moscow should continue the war in Chechnya, while 44 per cent wanted to see peace talks to end the conflict. But a resounding 49 per cent of respondents declared that Russian forces were acting "not firmly enough" in Chechnya. Only nine per cent said that their actions were "too firm".

The toughening of policy will not stop with Chechnya. In an atmosphere of growing xenophobia, the power of the security establishment can be expected to increase. We can anticipate a further crackdown on press freedom and individual rights within the context of Putin's "managed democracy".

Foreign policy will be a more complex picture. The "power ministers" are unhappy with their president's warm relations with the West. But the president himself is very pleased with his thesis that the conflict in Chechnya is part of the global "war on terror". It seems that he is so convinced of it that he has started to believe it himself.

So if Putin wins western support for his convictions on the Chechen crisis, he will be ready to make counter gestures, such as for example, supporting a US-sponsored resolution on Iraq in the UN Security Council.

As for the Russian public, they appear to be deeply frightened and confused. In a year or so, there will again be a majority in favour of a peaceful solution to the Chechen problem - but who can say what the situation will be then or how many more thousands of lives will have been lost.

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