

GLEB PAVLOVSKY

The interview below, conducted in January 2012 by Tom Parfitt, then working for the Guardian in Moscow, has never before been published. It is a remarkable document—arguably the most revealing single account of Putin’s vision of rule, and its roots, to have emerged so far. From late 1999 to 2011, Pavlovsky was a key adviser to Putin in the management of Russian opinion—one of the regime’s two leading ‘political technologists’, along with Vladislav Surkov. The profiles of the pair were quite distinct. Where the half-Chechen Surkov, born in 1964, is a pure product of post-communism, who rose through banking and business to the counsels of the Kremlin as a post-modern ideologue and part-time novelist, Pavlovsky—born in Odessa over a decade earlier, in 1951—was a dissident student in the late 60s, taxed with ‘anarchism and left extremism’. Arrested in the early 80s for his part in an underground journal, after collaborating with the authorities he was exiled to the north, rather than jailed. Under Gorbachev he returned to Moscow, becoming an active publicist in the democratic ferment of the time, before throwing in his lot with Yeltsin and helping to organize the rigged election that kept him in the Kremlin in 1996. Thereafter he was an architect of ‘managed democracy’ under Putin, whom he could observe closely for over a decade of service, until in the spring of 2011 he opposed his patron’s return to a third Presidency, and was dismissed. Intellectually sharper and more historically minded than Surkov (also, if less drastically, side-lined), Pavlovsky draws a striking portrait of Putin’s background, temperament and outlook—above all his attitude to capital. He also offers a vivid insider’s account of the way in which the political consensus Putin had enjoyed started to fall away once he decided to brush Medvedev aside and move back to the Kremlin—requiring, in Pavlovsky’s view, a now full-out financialization of a political system that has become a ‘hybrid of an insurance company and a casino’. Pavlovsky, famous in the eyes of critics for his ‘swaggering cynicism and épatage’, describes himself as a ‘specialist in the construction and protection of government’. Since this interview, he has been outspokenly critical of the regime’s handling of the crisis in the Ukraine, as unleashing blind emotions on the street of just the sort that the political technology he helped build was designed to suppress. In a recent article, he has singled out the role of Russian television for attack, fearing that it has become a quasi-independent and potentially destabilizing power within the regime, as a ‘pathogenic’ force whipping up a popular hysteria that may come back to haunt it.

PUTIN'S WORLD OUTLOOK

Interview by Tom Parfitt

What are the roots of Putin's ideological worldview?

BY THE BEGINNING of the 1990s Putin had developed almost all the ideas he espouses today. He'd only just started working in St Petersburg, but if we look at documentary recordings of the time, we see that he already had a whole series of attitudes concerning, for example, the idea that Russia's system of administration should be a unitarian, centralized state, and also his condoning the *chinovniki* [bureaucrats] taking bribes. That surprised many people, but it's undeniable that he took a positive view of this. He even shared—and repeated—the scandalous thesis of the then mayor of Moscow, Gavril Popov, that bureaucrats had the right to a commission on contracts.

There was also, of course, his fine contempt for the democrats of those years, who had received power for free, without a struggle, as if they had just found it in the street. So most of the ideas were already present in this period, including signs of Putin's opportunism—his sense that there's no need to go against the grain, that in fact you need to go with it. Why fight a trend and use up your resources? You have to take the resources of the trend and achieve what you want with them. That instinct was with Putin from the beginning. He had also taken from Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, head of the ultra-nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, the idea that Russia should be divided up into *general-gubernatorstva*—with a general-governor in charge of every region. Yeltsin also dreamed about such an arrangement, but wasn't able to achieve it. It's a very popular idea in Russia.

In what sense were these ideas shaped by the collapse of the Soviet Union?

Putin belongs to a very extensive, but politically opaque, unrepresented, unseen layer of people, who after the end of the 1980s were looking for *revanche* in the context of the fall of the Soviet Union. I was also one of them. My friends and I were people who couldn't accept what had happened: who said we can't let it continue to happen. There were hundreds, thousands of people like that in the elite, who were not communists—I, for example, was never a member of the Communist Party. They were people who just didn't like how things had been done in 1991. This group consisted of very disparate people, with very different ideas of freedom. Putin was one of those who were passively waiting for the moment for *revanche* up till the end of the 90s. By *revanche*, I mean the resurrection of the great state in which we had lived, and to which we had become accustomed. We didn't want another totalitarian state, of course, but we did want one that could be respected. The state of the 1990s was impossible to respect. You could think well of Yeltsin, feel sorry for him. But for me, it was important to see Yeltsin in a different light: on the one hand, it was necessary to protect him from punishment; on the other, Yeltsin was important as the last hope for the state, because it was clear that if the governors came to power they would agree another Belovezhsky Accord, after which Russia would no longer exist.

Putin is a Soviet person who did not draw lessons from the collapse of Russia. That is to say, he did learn lessons, but very pragmatic ones. He understood the coming of capitalism in a Soviet way. We were all taught that capitalism is a kingdom of demagogues, behind whom stands big money, and behind that, a military machine which aspires to control the whole world. It's a very clear, simple picture which I think Putin had in his head—not as an official ideology, but as a form of common sense. His thinking was that in the Soviet Union, we were idiots; we had tried to build a fair society when we should have been making money. If we had made more money than the western capitalists, we could have just bought them up, or we could have created a weapon which they didn't have. That's all there is to it. It was a game and we lost, because we didn't do several simple things: we didn't create our own class of capitalists, we didn't give the capitalist predators on our side a chance to develop and devour the capitalist predators on theirs.

To what extent are these ideas still the bedrock of Putin's political sensibility, and of the Russia he has brought into being?

I don't think Putin's thinking has changed significantly since then. He sees them as common sense. That's why he feels comfortable and assured in his position; he's not afraid of arguing his corner. He thinks: look at those people in the West, here's what they say, and here's what they do in reality. There is a wonderful system with two parties, one passes power to the other, and behind them stands one and the same thing: capital. Now it's one fraction of capital, now another. And with this money they've bought up all the intelligentsia and they organize whatever politics they need. Let's do the same! Putin is a Soviet person who set himself the task of *revanche*, not in a stupid, military sense, but in a historical sense. He set it for himself in Soviet language, in the language of geopolitics, that of a harsh pragmatism that was close to cynicism, but was not ultimately cynical. Putin is not a cynic. He thinks that man is a sinful being, that it is pointless to try to improve him. He believes the Bolsheviks who tried to create fair, right-thinking people were simply idiots, and we should not have done that. We wasted a lot of money and energy on it, and at the same time tried to free other nations. Why do that? We don't need to.

Putin's model is completely different from that of Zyuganov, the head of the rump Communist Party of the Russian Federation. Putin's idea is that we should be bigger and better capitalists than the capitalists, and be more consolidated as a state: there should be maximum oneness of state and business. A two-party system like in the US? Wonderful, we'll have that too. Putin worked for many years to make that happen. Although he admits he has not been successful, I think that's still what he wants, although he realizes it's a much greater task than he imagined. But politics should be in parties. The current set-up is not a one-party system, there is no analogy with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The governing party, United Russia, is not the state. It's just a sack full of people hanging on to the Kremlin—a telephone system, transmitting signals from the Kremlin to the bottom through the regional apparatus. It has absolutely no independence and cannot act on its own, in contrast to the old CPSU. It cannot fulfil political directives. It needs full instructions, one, two, three, four and five. If three and four are missing, it

stops and waits to be told what to do. United Russia has nothing in common with the CPSU. It has been useful as a component of the system. This was one of the conclusions that Putin drew—that one needs a vote, one needs legitimacy from the people and not from the fact that in 1917 you seized the Winter Palace.

Does he really want a two-party system with genuine political competition for power?

Putin doesn't believe that there is real competition between the political parties in the West. He thinks of it as a game, like a round of golf in a private club: one player is slightly stronger, another is slightly weaker, but in fact there is no real competition. He imagines it as it was in the Federal Republic of Germany after the war, under the leadership of Konrad Adenauer. There are two parties, one of which has power, and the second waits, perhaps for a long time. The Social Democrats waited, I think, from 1945 to 1970. It's a sort of one-and-a-half party system. Putin always said that at some point in the future the opposition will gain power, and we must be ready for that moment. By being ready, he meant that we must be both here and there, that is, controlling both parties. The second party hasn't really worked out yet in Russia; but Putin wasn't against the Communists turning into social democrats. The parties were all supposed to be controlled by the President, of course. The idea of a presidential power that stands higher than the other three powers is in our constitution. The President has a special kind of power which does not relate to executive power: executive power ends with the Prime Minister. The President is above them all, like a tsar. For Putin that is dogma. He thinks that in old societies and states there is a sense of order—people don't aspire to destroy their opponent when they are victorious at the elections—and we don't have that sense of order. He also thinks that all forms of power in Russia so far have been unperfected: he wants to build a strong, durable form of government.

So Putin was consciously trying to propagate the idea of the president-as-tsar?

Putin has never liked the idea of a party president. But there has never been a full consensus in his team on that question. Those who imagined a party president understood it not in the Western sense of that phrase, but rather as a periodic rotation of an elite group which spends some time in power and gathers its bonuses—financial, career and

reputational advantages—and then moves aside. The second group moves into power, but they don't aspire to destroy each other. Putin always said, we know ourselves, we haven't reached that stage yet; we know that as soon we move aside, you will destroy us. He said that explicitly: you'll put us up against the wall and execute us. That was a very deep belief, based on the tough confrontations of 1993, when Yeltsin fired on the Supreme Soviet and killed a lot more people—as Putin knows—than was officially announced. There was also the confrontation of 1999, when the group led by Yevgeny Primakov and Yuri Luzhkov told Yeltsin directly that if he didn't hand them power voluntarily he should expect the fate of Nicolae Ceaușescu.

So, a 'managed democracy'?

Yes, we are talking about managed democracy, but maybe you in the West have forgotten that this concept was widespread in the 1950s in European countries where there had been fascism. In Germany, for example, there was the same idea: Germans have a tendency to totalitarianism so they must not be allowed near politics. They should have the possibility to vote freely, but the people who control real politics must stay the same, they must not yield. A strict system of control has to be created. Everything in Russia—the high vote barrier to get into the State Duma, the one-and-a-half party system—is taken from the German experience. It's just that in Russia it hasn't been completely successful, with the breaking up of finance and politics. Is it cynical from the point of view of the theory of democracy? Probably, yes, but here it doesn't look like cynicism. Maybe it was carried out more successfully in Europe, but your system is older, you have learnt how to do it better.

It is important to note that a certain 'Putin consensus' developed, within which different positions co-existed: a consensus that involved both the people and the elite. This was a pact between the ruling elite and the main groups in society, who were guaranteed a degree of social distribution. It is not enough, because the state is poor, or at least it was at the beginning of the Putin presidency. At the heart of this pact are the employees of the state bureaucracy, who in the 1990s were in a very weak position—with the exception of the ministers, of course, but not everyone is a minister. The consensus included the regional bureaucracy and the military structures who were humiliated in the 1990s, but also a section of the lower intelligentsia, doctors and teachers; and finally,

it included women, on whom everything and everyone relied, because men didn't know how to adapt to the new system. There was a terribly high mortality rate, and women became the heads of families. These layers of people who had lost out in the past seized on the fact that they were the most important in the country.

On the other hand, this consensus also had to include an elite which wanted to feel free, and which demanded a maximum freedom to move across borders. For Yeltsin the relaxation of visa restrictions was not a priority. For Putin, this was important from the start. If you want to leave the game, then please, go. There will be no ideological pressure—none is necessary. It will be a state without ideas, based on common sense and on the average man, the citizen. Nonetheless, the masses must not be given access to power—the people are totalitarian and cannot be trusted to rule. This was the Putin consensus, which began in 2000, when there was a genuine desire for depoliticization and a return to something closer to the Soviet model, and which only began to crumble a year ago. It started to erode when Putin decided he was the sole guarantor, that he alone was able to control the whole situation. That was his mistake. His decision to return to the presidency in 2012 was a delusion of grandeur. The consensus had made him into a charismatic figure, and he believed in it.

So you are suggesting that the 'Putin consensus' has collapsed since late 2011?

When he stepped back from power in 2007, Putin had decided to experiment with an expansion of the consensus. That was his principal idea—the country needs change, it can't be ruled by generals. The successor needs to be someone different, or there will be stagnation. So this was a modernization of the consensus. Then it became clear, to me at least, that Putin was beginning to put the brakes on this process. There were some major internal changes. In the spring of 2010, Putin fell into a kind of depression, which was very noticeable. He even began to speak badly—he would read from pieces of paper. There was an uncertainty, a lack of confidence, when he appeared in front of people. He didn't look into the camera, which is not like him. A doubt appeared in his mind about his own decisions, and about the people he was working with. He began to change. He decided that they were all doing something not quite right, everyone was making wrong decisions, including Dmitry Medvedev. And he had no influence over that. So a kind of a fear

deepened in him. It's a complete myth that Putin and Medvedev agreed years ago that Putin would return, although they may have discussed the idea a hundred times. This is politics. It was always an open question. Medvedev and Putin have a different way of talking. They are old friends, they joke with each other. A lot depends on hints.

In 2008, after the transfer of power, there had been nervousness in the Kremlin about how people would respond to Medvedev, or maybe that he wouldn't be able to handle anything. It was a very nervous moment. So they probably had a discussion about what would happen if things didn't go right. After all, Putin's ratings had behaved as if they were on Viagra—they grew all the time and rose smoothly. By the way, Putin's highest ratings came after he was no longer president, in 2008. But Putin probably saw the question of his possible return as one that had been decided, while Medvedev understood it as an option, one that he had the power to avoid. Putin probably said, if your ratings overtake mine, then fine. But there would not have been a formal agreement. In 2010 the feeling began to change—and the paradox, in that they had worried whether Medvedev would find favour, is that it started to happen just as the ruling elite began to believe that Putin probably wouldn't return and began to migrate toward Medvedev. That was what really put Putin on guard. We did a piece of research for the Kremlin at the end of summer 2010, which showed that the elites, including the power elite, were inclining toward support for Medvedev. Pensioners, who were considered the main support base for Putin, now preferred Medvedev. This was mostly men; women mainly stayed with Putin. Medvedev began to feel more confident and Putin got frightened. There was a moment in 2010 when their ratings were at the same level, and that also alarmed Putin. From the autumn of 2010, after Medvedev insisted that Luzhkov must go, and achieved this goal—Putin didn't like that because it was a very powerful gesture—Putin began to show, at first subtly, that all was not yet decided.

Why couldn't Putin stay 'national leader' and let Medvedev be President?

What does 'national leader' mean? If you are basing your views, as Putin does, on the idea that the Russian people are ready at any moment to pounce on the authorities and tear them into bloody pieces, then you can't rely on some ghostly construction like 'national leader'. The question is, where is the real power, where are the buttons and levers? Putin

had the feeling that Medvedev was eroding his popularity and that it was time for him to return to the stage. Sociologists were telling him that as soon as he even hinted at a comeback, his ratings would rise to the heavens. But he couldn't say that because it would have broken the rules of the tandem; at the same time, Medvedev hinted often enough that he was ready to stay. So by the end of 2010 there was a great deal of tension in the relationship, exacerbated by the fact that they didn't talk about it—as happens in families; the problem is that the problem is not being discussed. They talked about everything except that. Putin thought, 'He's not talking to me because he's got some kind of plan', and Medvedev was thinking the same about Putin. Moreover, he was the President, why should he have to discuss such things with the Prime Minister? A kind of vehemence entered Medvedev's behaviour—for example when he sharply criticized Putin over Libya. That underlined the difficult relationship that had come about. There was a constant fear that Medvedev would suddenly sack the government, and that this would create a completely different situation. This fear reached its high point in the spring of 2011.

That was when I left—in April 2011. It was on the direct order of the Moscow White House, that is, the personal order of Putin. I had expressed the opinion that there was a real problem facing our guarantee to the ruling elite. Modernization would change the character of power; there was a need to remove fear from the system, so that people in the elite weren't afraid that with a change of government they would end up in prison. There needed to be a pact. But the problem was that Medvedev didn't want to discuss anything with Putin, while Putin himself thought he was the only one capable of being the guarantor, even though he could no longer guarantee anything. People in his circle kept saying, look what's happening, we're going to end up in Lefortovo prison.

Why that fear?

In the Kremlin establishment, ever since Yeltsin's 1993 attack on the Parliament, there has been an absolute conviction that as soon as the power centre shifts, or if there is mass pressure, or the appearance of a popular leader, then everybody will be annihilated. It's a feeling of great vulnerability. As soon as someone is given the chance—not necessarily

the people, maybe the governors, maybe some other faction—they will physically destroy the establishment, or we'll have to fight to destroy them instead. In fact, the risk of the country collapsing was averted; to that extent, Putin's *revanche* succeeded. Despite all the corruption, there was no longer the threat of separatism in the North Caucasus, and there was a consensus around a unified state that hadn't existed in the 1990s. No one in the regions wanted to break away and create a separate state—that desire disappeared. Putin created a legitimate presidency. There was stabilization. People no longer wanted to rebuild the Soviet Union, although, of course, Putin still wanted to create a great state.

On what grounds did you oppose his resumption of the Presidency?

Putin's return was a tactical mistake. I said at the time that it wouldn't be accepted either by the people or by the elite. A week after the announcement of the *rokirovka*—the 'castling', the Medvedev/Putin swap in September 2011—Putin's rating fell sharply, and Medvedev's more sharply still, which shows the reaction: it was not accepted even by those who had previously supported Putin. So the Putin consensus began to crumble. While it had held, people had no particular complaints about the elections. Either they didn't vote, or they voted for the party of power. But after the *rokirovka*, they quickly became dissatisfied—the December 2011 legislative elections provoked a negative reaction. The United Russia party has never played a big role in the economy of the regions. It's a club of local elites. But now it became the fall guy. It became paralysed and started to collapse. Putin had compounded the problem when he created the People's Front coalition in the spring of 2011, diluting the United Russia structures. He showed that he didn't need anything to run the country; he would do it himself—encouraging the idea of a personalized system. That was a mistake, because the system hadn't been personalized for a long time. And it wasn't ready to love Putin. The tandem was at least a kind of pluralism. People didn't want to return to the stereotype of a single leader; and Putin thought that they did. I was surprised. He's normally cautious and has good instincts, but here he took a big risk.

At the start of 2011 I kept saying to Vladislav Surkov and others in the administration that it would be better if Medvedev stayed. Surkov saw that as the preferable option. I never had the impression that Surkov

wanted the experiment of Putin's return. He sensed the limits of the system. He was the last person in the Kremlin who understood what the Kremlin could withstand and what it couldn't. And now there's no one left to feel that.

Putin can no longer be the guarantor. Ten years ago he could say, 'I guarantee you your property on certain conditions'. Or he could say to the oligarchs, 'you can do this, but you can't do that or that.' The reason why he can't do that now is because every instruction needs to be bought and paid for—so that someone listens to you, so that your order is carried out. The vertical of power is a system of accreditation: you literally have to pay to get things done. In ten years, the readiness of people to love Putin and agree with everything he does has changed fundamentally. It's no longer there. Before, no one could risk confrontation—a governor, for example—because he would certainly lose. But now a space for dissent has opened up. Everybody has resources. Putin can keep on dispensing money so that he is loved, but each individual admirer will need to be paid. When I say payment, I mean financial bonuses of some kind. We have completely financialized politics. The authorities exist only within the boundaries of their ability to give credit. And in this sense our system is absolutely ideal, what is required in the world of globalization. Putin's power does not lie in issuing orders—he can't order anything. It lies in the fact that he's the one who can go to the world market in the name of Russia's vast natural resources. It's a monopoly. Economically the Putin consensus continues to function beautifully.

What constraints do you think Putin will now be operating under?

In other respects, the consensus is over. Everybody wants a guarantor of their property, but Putin's guarantees were only in force while the 'Putin majority' existed—the liberal elite, the oligarchs, entrepreneurs, bureaucrats, older women—all of them supported Putin's every word. In that situation they felt protected, insured, as long as they didn't break the consensus. In practice, the power vertical works from the bottom up. If a person wants to do something he begins to trade, and to do that he appeals to the highest authority, the Kremlin, or to its representatives—then he can act, and it's fine. But now there is a situation where no one can guarantee his property. The consensus is over, and at the same time

a whole shadow system of property has emerged, which publicly bears no relation to reality. And it cannot protect itself. How will Putin protect it? Tell people not to take kickbacks? Not a single person in the country will listen to him. For Putin, the fact that Medvedev couldn't deal with this was part of the reason why he decided that Medvedev wouldn't be able to cope with Russia.

How has he dealt with the protests that erupted in late 2011 against the Kremlin?

So far it's clear that Putin has no strategy; he's very reactive. But for the moment, by intuition, he's waiting for the protests to exhaust themselves, as they did to a certain extent over the Christmas interlude. It was Santa Claus who dealt the greatest blow to our democratic movement so far, not Putin. The most important thing is that the Putin consensus has crumbled, but a set of social groups has remained that sees no alternative, and they want a guarantee. In fact, they no longer believe that Putin can give that. But if not him, then who? Our state is a unique hybrid of an insurance company and a casino. Everyone is guaranteed that they won't fall below a certain level, while at the same time, a great gamble is being played with their money on the world market. But people won't burn down an insurance company, because their insurance would go up in flames with it. People look at Dmitry Bykov—a popular poet who appeared on stage at the protests—and think: 'a wonderful, fat, jolly person, a poet, but what will happen with our money?' And it's not only *siloviki* who have such thoughts.

What do you think the outcome will be?

Putin will become president in the March 2012 election, probably in the first round, but there is no effective system for him to use. A new party needs to be created. Putin will be obliged to rule by some kind of coalition, even though he hates that. This is why there's been a relatively soft approach to the demonstrators, and why Putin hasn't rejected Medvedev's reforms on parties, even though he doesn't like them. But we will have to wait and see if the circumstances demand that Putin creates a coalition. Will he be able to resign himself to that—can he become a coalition president? If he can't, there will be a very big crisis, and soon.

Will he be able to create a government, because it's absolutely clear that Medvedev as Prime Minister will not be able to do that himself. Who will create the government? Putin will need to become the head of the commission that destroys the very system he himself created, and devise another. Will he be successful in putting this 'liquidation committee' together? I don't know.