Right: President Vladimir Putin counts himself into his new year's televised speech. Below: Russia is now more open to the West, but has this helped or hindered the struggling nation?

HAMMER AND PICKLE

While Vladimir Putin relishes certain re-election, dissidents struggle to be heard. Because 13 years after the fall of communism, Russia is still reeling under the old guard. And for the people, bribery and corruption remain the only answer to their dilemmas. By Mark Franchetti

Most Muscovites have witnessed this scene at least once in their lives. Mid-morning or early evening, any day of the week. Kutuzovsky Prospekt, one of the main highways in Moscow. The road is a sprawling 12-lane artery used by nearly 200,000 motorists each day. The flow of cars is relentless, even at night, and the noise is deafening. But twice a day the flow suddenly ceases and the air is filled with an eerie silence. In an operation carried out with military precision, police clear the lanes and block off all access routes. Within only a few minutes the highway is emptied, down to the last car. It is so deserted it could be frozen in time. Everyone waits.

Then, on the horizon, the wide road is filled with flashing blue lights and the sound of distant sirens. A motorcade appears. Travelling at speeds of up to 100mph, an armoured dark-blue limousine flashes by as traffic wardens salute from the roadside. The vehicle is flanked by police cars and minivans crammed with bodyguards pointing machineguns out of the windows. Inside the limousine, seated comfortably behind drawn curtains as he is driven to work in the Kremlin or to his home in Moscow's leafy suburbs, is Russia's most powerful man: President Vladimir Putin.

Russians have become accustomed to the discomfort caused by Putin's travel arrangements. A stretch of more than 20 miles is cleared in this fashion to allow him to move without inconvenience. Even fire engines and ambulances are trapped in the gridlock.

But people wait patiently. Publicly at least, nobody complains and no law-maker has ever dared suggest curbing the president's privileges. One driver who failed to give way had his Lada rammed by a van carrying Putin's bodyguards and was later jailed for 10 days. He was even briefly accused of trying to assassinate the president.

For the past seven years I have lived and worked on Kutuzovsky Prospekt and have watched the motorcade speed by hundreds of times, first under Boris Yeltsin, the first democratically elected president of Russia, then under Putin, his chosen successor. But it is a scene that still draws me to the window at least once a day. Few moments better capture the contempt of the Russian state for its people. This power is bullying, not democratic. It is there to be abused, not questioned. I am reminded of this sad reality each morning when I watch Putin commute to work.

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As more than 100m Russians prepare to go to the polls next Sunday, the outcome of the country's fourth democratic presidential election since the collapse of communism could hardly be more predictable. Putin, 51, is set to win a second four-year term in the Kremlin with a landslide victory. His popularity ratings are so high that they compare to those of Kim Jong-Il, the North Korean dictator, with the notable difference that under Putin there is no need to rig the polls. The only thing as astonishing as the level of his popularity is the lack of opposition. Irina Khakamada, the sole credible Kremlin critic to be running in the election, will be lucky to win more than 2% of the vote. Most other candidates are Kremlin stooges who threw their hat in the ring to create the impression that voters have a choice. Such is Putin's popularity that he refused to take part in any television debates, appear in ads or go on the campaign trail. With the result such a foregone conclusion, the Kremlin's only fear is that people will not bother to vote.

Regardless of voter turnout, Putin will rule Russia until at least 2008. Despite numerous denials, rumours persist that the Kremlin and the Duma, the lower house of parliament, plan to change the constitution to give him a third term or, more likely, extend his next four years in office to seven. Putin's rule is unchallenged and he could pass almost any law he wishes. Effortlessly. The irony is that most Russians would welcome such an extension of power.

Shortly after Yeltsin was re-elected in 1996, one Russian oligarch reportedly claimed that the country's elites could make anyone president of Russia if they chose to, even a monkey. This brash claim shed light on the extent to which ordinary Russians are manipulated. As in Soviet times, they are told what to do. The only difference is that now they are deceived into believing that they have control over their destiny.

Putin hardly fits the description of a monkey but, by his own admission, he was hand-picked for presidency. A law-school graduate from St Petersburg, he served 16 years in the KGB, including a cold-war stint in East Germany. That Yeltsin chose him as a successor had nothing to do with his achievements in the world of intelligence, and everything to do with loyalty. In 1998, Putin was head of the Federal Security Bureau (FSB), the former KGB, when it leaked a video of Yuri Skuratov, a former state prosecutor,

In Russia, 35m people live below the poverty line. Meanwhile (below right), Moscow's newly rich elite enjoy nights in the company of topless waitresses. Below left: imported televisions, stereos and videos are sold at Bagrationovsky market. As is routinely the case in Moscow, the vendors pay protection money to trade here

cavorting with two prostitutes. Skuratov had sought to convict Yeltsin and close members of his family on corruption charges. The footage was aired on state television and Skuratov was forced out of office. The first decree Putin signed as acting president was to give Yeltsin and his family immunity from prosecution.

In August 1999, when Putin was presented to the Russian people as Yeltsin's chosen successor, the former KGB colonel's popularity stood at 2%. Only a few months later it reached more than 70%. During that brief period, Putin sent Russian troops back into Chechnya, the breakaway republic, launching a second brutal war that has claimed tens of thousands of lives. The military campaign was sparked by a series of apartment-block bombings which killed more than 300 people. Chechens were blamed but deny responsibility. To this day, this remains one of the murkiest chapters in Russia's post-Soviet history. Several people who sought to investigate claims that rogue elements of the FSB were behind the bombings have been detained or died in strange circumstances. It would be ludicrous to claim that Putin was involved in the attacks, but few would dispute that he owes much of his early popularity to his tough stance in Chechnya. The elections were free, but predictably Russians voted for the man the Kremlin told them to pick.

PUTIN'S RULE IS UNCHALLENGED: HE COULD PASS ALMOST ANY LAW

Russian society is about power and the abuse of power. Thirteen years after the collapse of communism, it is a country of struggle and suffering. Every year some 100,000 Russians die of poisoning from contraband vodka. Every 40 minutes a woman is killed as a result of domestic violence. Life expectancy for the average Russian man is 59, 16 years less than in Britain. Men are four times more likely to die a violent death here than in Finland, the country with the highest rate in the EU. Today, there are more street children in Moscow than were homeless after the second world war. Some 35m people live under Russia's poverty line, struggling on £45 a month. Some 2,000 army conscripts die each year from bullying, murders, suicide and accidents. Occasionally culprits are jailed, but in most cases the crimes are covered up and families are powerless when their sons come home in coffins.

During the latest conflict in Chechnya, the second launched by the Kremlin in less than a decade, I was taken by a group of Chechen

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made public my suspicion that he was shot, I received a call from the prosecutor's office. 'Why are you creating a scandal?' they said. 'You want to know the truth? Fine, we'll dig up your son's body for an autopsy.' How could I do that to my dead son? I'll shut up, but just leave him in peace."

To this day, the families of the dead hostages have not found out the causes of death of their loved ones because the Kremlin does not want to admit that the emergency services were negligent. Some death certificates state the cause as "terrorism" or "chronic illness". Others are blank.

I last saw Fadeyeva on the first anniversary of Yaroslav's death, at a large gathering of relatives of some of the dead hostages. According to the Russian way of honouring the dead, portraits of the victims were laid out in front of small glasses of vodka covered with a slice of black bread. To my right sat Irina, to my left Lena Baranovskaya, a hostage who lost both her son and husband in the siege. At one point, Irina's sister played an old recording of Yaroslav's joyful singing. Everyone, including myself, broke down in tears.

That same day, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Russia's richest man, had been arrested on fraud and tax-evasion charges. The story made headlines around the world. Regardless of whether Khodorkovsky, who five months on still languishes in jail, is guilty, his arrest was stark proof that, no matter how rich or powerful, there is no rule of law for those who fall out with the Kremlin. But as I sat between two grieving mothers I was reminded that the real victims of Russia's brutal system are its ordinary people, not yesterday's power brokers.

Accountability is a foreign concept, and public opinion has little power in Russia, but there are early signs of a growing civic society, spurred on by a few pioneers who are taking on the system. Relatives of Moscow's theatre-siege victims took the unprecedented step of suing the authorities, some to seek further compensation, others to get to the truth. Predictably, their claims were rejected – by their own admission, most knew they would be defeated. But they acted out of principle. They wanted their voices heard and demanded an apology. Similar attempts followed the tragedy of the Kursk, the nuclear submarine that sank to the bottom of the Barents Sea, killing all 118 crew members. Even Putin publicly demanded the prosecution of those army officers guilty of criminal negligence towards 100 conscripts recently left to freeze in temperatures of -25C.

Dozens of mothers have risked their lives by travelling to Chechnya to abduct their sons from the army. A group of soldiers' mothers gives advice on how to avoid the draft and constantly challenges authorities over the appalling conditions in the army. The parents of Alexander Sobakayev, a conscript who allegedly committed suicide, refused to bury his body for weeks in an attempt to force the army to carry out a second autopsy to acknowledge he was killed. There have been two cases of specialists falsely accused by the FSB of espionage who proved their innocence in court.

Some close Moscow friends of mine no longer pay bribes when they are harassed by the traffic

Putin answers a press question in August 1999

GRISHKIN DENIS/CORBIS SYGMA

'WE'VE BEEN TOLD WHAT TO DO FOR SO LONG, NOW IT'S ALL WE KNOW'

police. They take down the officer's number, call his superior and file a complaint. There is a small but growing middle class emerging, which holds the key to Russia's future. This is a new generation of smart, educated, hard-working, cosmopolitan people who speak foreign languages, earn good salaries and are not afraid of standing up for their rights. Too young to remember communism, for them Soviet subservience is an abstract concept. Though there aren't enough of them to change the system, they are not easily intimidated.

During Putin's first term, GDP has grown by 29.9%. Unemployment has fallen by one-third and the minimum wage has quadrupled in three years. The rate of inflation is down and the rouble has stabilised. To a great extent, the improvements in Russia's struggling economy are down to the rise of world oil prices. But one of Putin's greatest achievements is to have brought political stability. Before the elections he sacked the government, but it hardly compares with Yeltsin, who fired eight governments and 200 ministers and aides in nine years. It is undeniable that Putin has sought to open up Russia to the West.

But Putin has also ushered in a new era of authoritarianism, in particular towards the press. Gone is the idealism felt by journalists during the days of glasnost and perestroika. The disillusionment felt by most, a decade later, is an indictment of the way Russia's press went from being one of the most vibrant in the world to one of the most controlled.

As Putin prepares to rule Russia for at least another four years, all national TV channels are controlled by the Kremlin. Except for one liberal Moscow radio station and Novaya Gazeta, a daily newspaper that regularly publishes exposés of the war in Chechnya but sells only 125,000 copies, there is no free press here. Friends in the media say that under Putin, calls from Kremlin officials to pressurise them into killing off critical stories have once again become common. Glowing reports about Putin dominate evening news bulletins, despite the fact he surrounds himself with hawkish authoritarian figures from the former KGB.

But the adulation that millions of Russians feel for their president is so sycophantic, it is a source of embarrassment, even for Putin. To them he is not tainted by corruption, but is an energetic, hard-working leader whose vision is to make Russia great again. The contrast with Yeltsin – whose era was tainted by gaffes and addiction to vodka – could not be starker. If, in the West, Putin's authoritarian streak gives cause for concern, at home it's the key to his popularity. Democracy, liberalism and freedom of the press are luxuries for those who have lost everything and are struggling to survive.

"The sad truth is, we still have serfdom in our blood," said Katya Sosedova, a gentle violinist who was playing in the orchestra pit with her husband, Igor, the night the Chechens' hostage-takers stormed the Moscow theatre. Igor did not survive, and left his widow with three children to bring up alone. "We have been trampled over for so long that we don't have the power or the belief that we can change anything. We have been told what to do for so long that now it's all we know. We're resilient but it's difficult to break out of slavery."

Last autumn I was reminded of why, after witnessing such suffering and injustice during my seven years reporting in Russia, I remain deeply attached to its people. I was sitting in a derelict house in Grozny, the bombed-out Chechen capital, with a few colleagues from Russian TV. Night was falling and it was cold. It was time to eat.

An acquaintance set out to cook dinner outside in the dust. He pulled a pale and greasy chicken out of a plastic bag, dismembered it with his dirty hands, plunged it into a rusty old pot filled with water and lit a fire to boil it. It was a situation I had been in one time too many and I became vaguely depressed. As the man served the chicken on old newspaper pages, I asked why we had not gone to a nearby roadside kebab house instead. Surprised, he looked at me and smiled. "But Mark, this is romantic!" As we squatted on the ground to eat, a bottle of vodka was passed around, jokes were made and songs from the days of Soviet pioneer camps were sung.

This in the centre of a city levelled by bombs in one of the world's most brutal and bloody wars. Only in Russia could a fleeting romantic moment be lived in such a place. Only here, where people are guilty of such cruelty towards one another, could there be such endearing sentimentality. Perhaps one day I'll look down over Kutuzovsky Prospekt and witness the president of Russia on his way to the Kremlin, stuck in traffic jams, like any ordinary Muscovite. Far-fetched, maybe, but as Russians would say, "*Mechtat nye vredno*" and "*Nadezhda umirayet poslednei.*" It is not harmful to dream, and hope is the last to die ■

rebels to a safe house in a bombed-out village to talk to Sergei Fyodorov, a terrified 19-year-old Russian conscript whom they had taken prisoner. According to the Kremlin, Fyodorov should never had been sent to Chechnya because he had served less than six months in the army. "I was fooled," he said, looking more like a frightened child than a soldier sent to crush hardened fighters. "We were told we were being sent on a training exercise in the Caucasus, then that we'd be posted on the Chechen border. Instead I found myself on the front line, firing off from a tank into villages, not knowing if I was killing rebels or civilians."

Fyodorov was lucky. After a year in captivity he was exchanged for the bodies of a few Chechens. The Kremlin claims that 7,000 Russian soldiers have been killed in Chechnya in both conflicts, but the real figure is believed to be more than double. Nearly 100,000 Chechens have died. The capital, Grozny, has been subjected to the heaviest bombardment in Europe since the second world war, and looks like Dresden or Berlin did in 1945. The Russians stand accused of numerous war crimes, including rape, summary executions and kidnappings for ransoms and torture. But only a handful of officers have ever stood trial. There have even been cases of Russian officers selling off conscripts as slaves to the Chechens.

Parents are often lied to about their missing sons. In one harrowing example from the first war, I met the mothers of two soldiers killed in Chechnya who fought over a single tomb after one thought the remains of her son had been sent to the other by mistake. The two confronted each other at the cemetery, one asking for the body to be exhumed for identification, the other standing over the grave to prevent intrusion. "I know what it means to lose a son," said Valentina Ventsela, the mother who fought to stop the body being dug up. "I understand the distress of this other mother. I offered to place a picture of her son on the tombstone of mine. I told her that she could come stay whenever she wanted, that we would visit the grave together, but she refused." Lyubov Tumayeva, the other mother, felt no resentment towards Ventsela. She blamed the authorities. "I hate the Kremlin for doing this to its people," she said.

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A key word in understanding post-communist Russia is *krisha*, Russian for roof. In jargon the term means protection and is used to describe the backing, criminal or legitimate, needed to function in the cut-throat world of Russian business and politics. From the absurdly wealthy businessman to the poor Azeri market trader, everyone dedicates a copious amount of time to finding ways of beating the system. For every law and regulation, there are hundreds of exceptions.

In the early 1990s the oligarchs bought state-owned enterprises for a fraction of their real value and became billionaires. At the low end of the scale, Russians buy their driving licence without sitting an exam. Many students have to pay bribes to enter university. According to the latest survey, every second Russian family pays bribes to teachers and college officials for higher grades.

MANY STUDENTS HAVE TO PAY BRIBES TO ENTER UNIVERSITY

With little state medical care to speak of, access to good doctors and hospital beds is also a question of money. When the daughter-in-law of a close acquaintance was gang-raped in Moscow, her family did not turn to the police, because they doubted they would find the criminals. They turned instead to a group of local "heavies" who, for a small fee, tracked down the gang and took revenge by beating them senseless with clubs.

Even something as simple as driving is a clash of wills. No member of the monied classes can claim to have made it in Russian society unless he has managed to obtain a *migalka*, a flashing blue light similar to those used on police cars, which gives the owner, at a cost of $2,000, the right to break all traffic regulations. Politicians, bankers, oil barons and mafia bosses do not sit through traffic jams and are not flagged down by the police who stop other motorists to extort bribes. They use special lanes reserved for those with power. When no lane is available, they drive against the traffic.

Few things are not for sale in Russia, even seats in the Duma, but not because Russians are more dishonest than most other nations. The post-Soviet system is so bureaucratic, the laws so byzantine, and state salaries so miserable that it is impossible to survive without cutting corners. Doctors, nurses, policemen and teachers take bribes because they have no other way of feeding their families. Many young females turn to prostitution to put themselves through university. Some journalists take cash to publish positive stories about shady characters. In Moscow, traffic wardens pay bribes to their superiors to be assigned the street corners recognised as the best spots to collect bribes from motorists.

At the height of the war in Chechnya, the officer in charge of the Russian army's biggest makeshift field morgue had to trade body bags to fuel the refrigerator truck used to transport the dead. His fellow officers used the bags to insulate field saunas. When I met Sergei Tsygankov, he had suffered two heart attacks brought on by the horrors he had witnessed. He drank heavily and had daytime hallucinations in which some of the 2,000 bodies he had handled would come alive.

"We are supposed to pay these dead boys our last respects," he said. "Instead, the other officers steal the petrol to sell it off and I have to barter bags to get it back. That says it all about the state of our army and the whole country. It's f***ed up. We have lost all sense of values."

But there is a clear exception to the rule that one can buy anything: when the individual has to confront the power of the state. This was Irina Fadeyeva's fate when, on a drizzly evening in late October 2002, the soft-spoken single mother went to a Moscow theatre to watch Russia's first home-grown musical with her son, Yaroslav, 15. Five minutes into the second act, 40 heavily armed Chechens charged into the auditorium and took more than 800 people hostage. Fifty-eight hours later, the siege ended when the Russians stormed the theatre, killing all the Chechens.

Irina survived. Yaroslav did not. He was one of 130 hostages who died after the Russians used a gas to neutralise the Chechens. Some hostages choked in their seats; many others died as a result of the emergency services' slow response. His mother found Yaroslav's body in a city morgue. Officially, none of the hostages was shot during the storming, but Fadeyeva is adamant her son had a bullet hole in his forehead that had been covered with heavy make-up. She had promised her son she would never abandon him. Trying to keep her promise, she hailed a taxi, paid the driver with her wedding ring and asked to be taken to the Moskva river. She threw herself into the icy waters but was rescued before she could kill herself.

The theatre siege was deeply embarrassing to Putin, who promised to "wipe out Chechen bandits, wherever they are, even in the sh**ter". That the Chechens could pull off such an attack gave the lie to the Kremlin's claim that the war had been won. The victims' families were paid $3,000 each, a substantial sum by Russian standards – the country's average wage is $300 a month. But there would be no public inquiry, no resignations, no sackings. Instead, four high-ranking law enforcement officers were awarded medals.

Fadeyeva's attempts to get to the real cause of Yaroslav's death have been in vain. "After I ⋙

PUTIN'S KGB CLIQUE

The iron men who still rule Russia

Viktor Ivanov KGB general and deputy head of the presidential administration. Ivanov, 53, is regarded by many as one of the main players behind the attack on Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Russia's richest man, who is now in jail.

Igor Sechin Head of Putin's secretariat and deputy head of administration. The 43-year-old worked in Angola as a military translator and is rumoured to have been a KGB agent.

Sergei Ivanov Defence minister and close friend of Putin, whom he met in the 1970s when they served in the St Petersburg KGB. The 51-year-old is tipped as the man Putin is most likely to choose as his successor.

Nikolai Patrushev Director of the FSB and very close friend of Putin. The 52-year-old is also in charge of preventing Chechen terrorist acts in Russian cities.

TOP: ITAR-TASS. SECOND BOTTOM: EPA. BOTTOM: AP