

The ex-KGB spymaster who's tamed the West



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The re-election of Vladimir Putin in Russia's presidential election on Sunday by a landslide majority of over 76 per cent is one more slap in the face to his liberal critics and demonisers in the West. Despite portrayals in the mainstream Western media as a kleptocratic mafia boss who represses his people and commits aggression and subterfuge abroad, Russians have yet again reposed faith in the only man they have known as their nation's saviour since he ascended from obscurity to power in 1999.

By consolidating his iron grip over Russia, Mr Putin has decisively defeated what he believes is a long-running nefarious plot by American and Western European governments and news industries to force regime change in his country. On the eve of his latest uneventful election triumph, the Russian state media highlighted "dirty tricks" plotted in the West to trigger anti-Putin street protests and smear his good name through vicious "false flag" operations.

This Western "meddling", the Kremlin contends, is proof of Mr Putin's worth as the ultimate defender of Russia's conservative interests and the upholder of a strong state tradition. One example cited by the Putin camp as proof of the Western "fake news" assault to undermine his support within Russia is the mysterious case of Novichok poisoning of a former Russian intelligence agent, Sergei Skripal, who betrayed Russia and was fatally sickened along with his daughter by exposure to a nerve agent in Salisbury, England, earlier this month.

While the Western media and governments cried hoarse that this was another outrageous crime by Mr Putin, a former KGB colonel who never forgives traitors and goes to sadistic lengths to punish them, the way this cloak-and-dagger saga played out inside Russia had the exact opposite effect.

If the Skripal chemical attack confirmed to Western minds that Mr Putin is a ruthless international killer operating with impunity, the Russian President's electoral support appears to have swelled at the last moment as a result of this umpteenth standoff with the West.

Mr Putin's campaign spokesman commented that overall voter turnout in the presidential election — 67 per cent in spite of boycott calls by Opposition politicians — was partly a result of Britain's baseless psychological warfare against Russia. He rubbed it in, saying: "We have to say thank you to Britain for that, because once again they didn't read the Russian mentality correctly."

This much-touted "Russian mentality" comprises traits impervious to American or Western European influence: obedience and love for entrenched strongmen, be they czars like Peter the Great (1682-1725), Communist dictators like Josef Stalin (1924-1953), or the present state capitalist intelligence apparatchik Putin.

By harking back to age-old Kremlin themes of order and stability at home and grandeur overseas, Mr Putin has succeeded in maintaining a hold over the Russian popular imagination. His view that Western-prescribed democracy doesn't fit Russia's political culture and that "democracy should not be accompanied by collapse of the

state, anarchy and laissez-faire" has left a lasting impression on Russians, especially older ones who devoutly keep voting for Mr Putin as the antidote to chaos and fragmentation which beset their country during the painful 1990s' post-Communist transition.

Younger Russians in urban centres are indeed exposed to individualistic Western thought and there is cynicism among civil society activists about Mr Putin ruling indefinitely and selling Russia to his crony capitalist oligarchs. Yet these Russians aren't typical and get branded by Mr Putin as lackeys and "foreign agents" of the West active in conspiracies to weaken Russia.

The nearest Russian liberal foes of Mr Putin came to achieving a revolution was in 2012, when allegations of vote-rigging and fraud marred his previous presidential election victory. But they couldn't sustain the momentum of protests not just due to a crackdown by Mr Putin's security apparatus but also as they don't represent the mainstream Russian psyche, historically averse to rebellion against rulers.

When Lenin overthrew the Czarist monarchy in the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the actual number of participants in the insurrection was rather small and confined to a band of fanatical Communist fighters. The expected mass wave of popular uprisings has rarely occurred in Russia, a land famed for its stoic endurance for suffering and pain.

The Russian people's will to survive extreme calamities without rising up against the rulers is well demonstrated by

Mr Putin's resilient authoritarian model. In the past few years, the country has faced down rounds of Western economic sanctions, sharp falls in oil prices, economic recession and routine attacks from the West as an international pariah that flouts global norms.

Contrary to Western hopes that the hardships befalling Russia would dent Mr Putin's electoral fortunes, they seem to have redounded to his advantage by reifying the spectre of foreign meddling and rallying ordinary Russians around him.

Mr Putin's eternal struggle as the nemesis of the liberal West hasn't just endeared him to Russians but is also inspiring the anti-establishment political wave currently shaking the West. Donald Trump's shocking win in the 2016 US presidential election, the Brexit vote, and the string of wins for far-right populist parties across Europe are seen in the Kremlin as vindications of its nationalistic rejection of Western elitism and globalisation.

Controversy shrouds Mr Putin's "troll farms" and "fake news" armies deliberately causing and stoking the populist surge sweeping parts of the West. But there's an undeniable common thread tying all the anti-establishment Western upstarts — their favourable opinion of Russia and desire to bury the hatchet with it over its military interventions in Ukraine and Syria.

Mr Putin has outlasted three American Presidents and is likely to stay on even after Mr Trump departs. Not only has he stalled the predicted onset of "democratization" in Russia, but is moulding a world where public confidence in liberal capitalism has hit rock bottom. The wily spymaster-turned-politician is having the last laugh in the domain of global public opinion. Whether one loves or hates him, he simply can't be ignored.

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