

# Russia: Putin sacks government on eve of presidential elections

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On February 24, President Vladimir Putin announced the surprise dismissal of the government of Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov. The decision expresses differences and conflicts that have reached a crisis point. It concentrates the levers of state power in the hands of the incumbent president and serves to prevent any disruption of Putin's re-election on March 14.

The sacking of the entire government only three weeks before the elections was unexpected and came without any public announcement or discussion. It reveals the deep weakness of the Kremlin regime. At a time when its authority is extremely unstable, and relies mainly on the personal popularity of the president, the Kremlin finds itself in an intense conflict with the influential oligarchs.

The sudden dismissal of the government also provides a vivid illustration of the present condition of Russian democracy. The president emerges increasingly as an authoritarian politician who tries to balance between the various social groups and interests, and reverts increasingly to undemocratic measures to suffocate every sign of opposition.

Putin's explanations, made on the same day, are contradictory and unconvincing. He admitted there were no formal reasons for dismissing the government. He even stressed that the government had functioned "satisfactorily."

In a number of further statements, delivered with a certain arrogance, he stressed Russia's macro-economic successes. *Interfax* reported that under the Kasyanov government, from May 2000 to February 2004, gross national product had risen by 26.5 percent and inflation had been cut almost in half. Although these figures say nothing about the real situation facing ordinary people and their daily fight for survival, according to Putin the government's sacking has nothing to do with them.

According to some press comments, if Putin's real concern had been in redefining the priorities of economic policy, there were numerous other ways for him to have done so. In any case, according to the constitution, he must formally reappoint the government following the presidential elections.

Another of Putin's comments seems to come nearer the mark concerning the real reasons for dismissing the government: "The uncertainties in the structures of the federal executive can be overcome with the recent cabinet reshuffle. This also supports the viability of the state apparatus to maintain the present speed of the reforms, in particular the reforms of the administration."

The reference to overcoming the "uncertainties in the structures

of the federal executive" is particularly interesting. Putin is worried about the loyalty of the administrative structures—not only in the centre, but also in the regions.

Notwithstanding the monolithic unity that appears to exist at the highest levels, these are riven by deep contradictions. Political rule is based upon the glaring social inequalities that arose in the course of the capitalist "reforms." The Putin regime is characterised by the fact that the frustrations of ordinary people with all the structures of the state power and the existing political parties find a negative expression in hopes regarding the person of the president.

These hopes are based not so much on Putin's positive programme (he is, after all, the representative of the *nouveaux riches*), but rest on a powerful tendency to dislike everything to do with the Yeltsin period and its devastating "shock therapy." Another reason can be found in the political vacuum that exists at present—the absence of any other attractive or respectable political figure or movement.

Given that the hopes placed in Putin grew out of increasing discontent with the social and political conditions since the collapse of the Soviet Union, his rule has become increasingly unstable and tenuous. The president has good reason to be afraid of any uncontrollable changes.

The general instability of Putin's rule is intensified by the conflict with the influential oligarchs. Putin's first years in office were marked by the peaceful coexistence of a newly strengthened state bureaucracy and these private entrepreneurs, which was regulated by means of corruption and secret agreements. Lately, however, it has become increasingly difficult to maintain these arrangements. The conflict between the government and the oligarchs has burst into the open since the struggle with the Yukos oil concern and the arrest of its chairman Mikhail Khodorkovskylast year.

The result was the "isolation" of Putin, about which Stanislav Belkovski, the Kremlin pundit and opinion leader of the campaign against the oligarchs, has written several times. Belkovski also observed that Putin's isolation in the highest circles of power was complemented by the ungovernability of the state apparatus.

Several events that have occurred during the presidential elections show that Putin is very vulnerable to criticism. Any candidate, even the most insignificant, can draw attention to himself and increase his election chances if he expresses only a fraction of the truth concerning the real situation, or protests against the deeply anti-democratic measures of the Putin regime.

This is the only explanation, for example, for the strange five-day disappearance of presidential candidate Ivan Rybkin, for which the Russian secret services are probably responsible. Rybkin's sharp criticisms were ended through a secret service operation. He was intimidated and discredited as a political figure and a private person.

The intimidation of presidential candidates continues. On the same day Putin dismissed Kasyanov, three candidates—Irina Chakamada, Sergei Glasiev and Nikolai Kharitonov—declared they would consider withdrawing their candidacy.

The Russian media has repeatedly expressed the fear that the absence of any alternative candidates could mean that turnout will sink below the critical 50 percent mark, since the presidential elections have been decided in advance and voters do not have any possibility of expressing their discontent. According to the constitution, the elections are invalid if turnout is below 50 percent and, if so, all existing candidates are excluded from a new election.

It is therefore critical for Putin's survival that the turnout reach the necessary level. The use of administrative measures could thereby play a crucial role. If for any reason sections of the structures of power in the centre or in the regions do not adhere to the Kremlin's rules, there could be unpredictable consequences.

Some of those around the oligarchs who have fallen into disgrace, such as Boris Beresovski, who lives in exile in London, are interested in the March 14 elections being invalid. They are agitating for an election boycott. Although they do not have access to the necessary media to publicise their line, they could throw substantial funds behind such a plan.

From the outset, ex-prime minister Kasyanov was connected with the leading oligarch clans who are no longer content with Putin. Kasyanov belonged to the few last year who dared to publicly criticise the attacks against Yukos. He condemned Khodorkovsky's arrest for not being objectively necessary.

However, Kasyanov did not adopt an independent political attitude. Rather, he manoeuvred and tried to reconcile his loyalty towards Putin with his support for the oligarchs. But even this little "courage" was enough to raise his political standing. As *Gaseta.ru* remarked, since last autumn Kasyanov was regarded in some circles "as a possible leader of an anti-Putin opposition."

Another important defender of the oligarchs was the former Kremlin chief-of-staff, Alexander Voloshin. He submitted his resignation shortly after the arrest of Khodorkovsky on October 24, 2003. Although he did this voluntarily, the resignation of this influential figure—like the current sacking of the prime minister and his government—happened shortly before the parliamentary elections.

Kasyanov's reaction to his sacking is remarkable. He has not dissented or protested, and has not attempted to coin political capital from it. He is undoubtedly playing according to the Kremlin's rules, which prohibit the controversy being conducted in public. Whatever the extent of the differences he may have with Putin, he is staying within the framework of the secret agreement and has not spoken openly against the incumbent president.

His humble acceptance of his dismissal is not an isolated case, but part of a tendency that has emerged clearly since the parliamentary elections last year. An entire series of nationally

well-known leading politicians—the chairman of the Communist Party Gennady Zuganov, the leader of the liberal Jabloko party Grigory Javlinski, and Boris Zhirinovski from the right-wing nationalist LDPR, as well as the leader of the Union of Rightwing Forces (SPS) Boris Nemzov—have all voluntarily forgone standing as candidates in the upcoming presidential elections. The results of the parliamentary elections have thereby played a crucial role, because at least some from them could profit from the elections to the Duma.

Their behaviour took the form of voluntary political surrender to Putin, dictated by their desire not to endanger the stability of the regime. They preferred to remain in the background for some time so as not to rock the boat.

Putin appointed Viktor Khristenko as acting government head; he had previously occupied the post of vice-premier with responsibility for questions of the oil and power complex. Born in 1957, Khristenko has enjoyed a successful career as a bureaucrat. He was initially concerned with privatisation on a regional level, and later with problems of the state of the federal finances.

Initially, he was close to the radical-liberal "Reformers" of the Yeltsin period, such as Anatoly Chubais. However, he never came to prominence for developing his own positions on current political questions. Khristenko's recommendation was that he was a colourless but skilful manoeuvrer who did not harbour any great political ambitions. He is regarded as a "technocrat," whose fate depends upon many circumstances.

Khristenko's personal opinions about the future of the country—insofar as one can assume he has any—can be judged from an article that appeared in *Wedomosti* at the end of January. In it he points out that both the path of "insularity" (the orientation towards Russia's internal resources) and the path of "openness" (accelerated liberalisation) have their risks. He stands for a "third way," which envisages a steady expansion of the "borders of the attainable market" particularly at the expense of the CIS states. These are ideas that correspond completely with the current political thinking of the Kremlin and which are associated with plans for a "weak" economic expansion of Russia within its traditional spheres of influence.



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