

Life As An Endless Power Play



by Reg Green

Risking a hernia at the local library the other day, I picked up ('hauled up' is perhaps more accurate) a copy of Philip Short's massive and absorbing book, "Putin." (The large print version, the only one on the library shelves that day, runs to 1011 pages of text, another 338 of notes and weighs 3.7 lbs.)

On the one hand, it traces Russia's extraordinary recovery under Putin's steely will from the collapse of the Soviet Union to its present position of power – real or illusory – when its every move is chewed to the bone to calculate its possible effects on the global balance of power.

On the other, it is an unending tale, involving all the main antagonists, of betrayals, venom, lies, intimidation, vengefulness and whatever other vices were at hand in the struggle for power, made more dangerous by plummeting relations with the US with its own full closet of ugly intrigues.

There are some nice examples of Russians' famed sardonic wit but I can remember only one outright laugh, a cartoon in a

St. Petersburg magazine in the days of the grab-what-you-can economy of the 1990s that shows a company manager saying to his boss, "The half-yearly results are quite encouraging, sir. We took in 30 percent more in bribes than we had to pay out."

For me the two most ominous facts in the whole Pandora's box are that Putin's usual breakfast is porridge and his lunch yoghurt and fruit. Ominous? Yes, that's what I have too.

"Maggie, will you hand me that map of the world, please?"