Putinism after Putin

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Many Russians were happy to exchange the freedoms of the 1990s for a stream of oil money and a concept of ‘order’ guaranteed by a paternalistic leader. Putin’s popularity may be wavering, but the demands he caters to are stronger than ever.

For several years now, Moscow has been in the grip of a graffiti epidemic. The city centre is full of buildings with empty side walls, almost inviting would-be muralists. What could better project the idea of Moscow as a modern city, reasoned the city authorities, than sanctioned street art? This is how Moscow got its giant portraits of famous Russian writers and ballerinas, not to mention a skyline of Crimea (painted after the annexation).

One day in June, we noticed that the side wall of a five-story building on Spartakovskaya Street belonging to the Defence Ministry was swarming with workers. They were painting the giant portrait of a military officer whose nose, moustache and haircut bore close a resemblance to Stalin. Well, everything is possible these days in Moscow, we reasoned. But the officer was wearing the epaulets of the Tsarist army, which was confusing. We approached one worker – a man in his fifties, busy watching his colleagues. ‘Is it Stalin?’ we asked. ‘No, it’s Przhevalsky,’ he said (Nikolay Przhevalsky was a Russian explorer-cum-military spy). ‘Thank God’ we laughed. The worker snapped back: ‘So you don’t like Stalin, huh?’

An exhibition of paintings held at a Moscow gallery in honour of Putin’s 62nd birthday. The exhibit depicted his achievements as the 12 Labours of Hercules. Photo by Evgeny Feldman

Respect for power: The heroes of today

A recent poll conducted by the independent Levada Center found that 70 per cent of Russians approve of Josef Stalin’s role in Russian history. The findings were met with disbelief among journalists and political activists. True, nostalgia for Stalin is nothing new: even in the liberal 1990s it was widely believed that Stalin had transformed the Soviet Union into a superpower by defeating Hitler. But now, in the late Putin years, the Stalin myth has gained a new lease of life. The Soviet dictator is today praised for yet another achievement – mercilessly fighting corruption by sending crooked party officials to the gulag. This narrative has been promoted tirelessly by the likes of Nikolai Starikov,
a nationalist pundit and author of bestselling books on Russian history, including one glorifying Stalin.

The fact that so many ordinary Russians accept this idea causes one to suspect that affection for Stalin may be inevitable. The novelist Viktor Erofeyev, author of the fictional memoir *Good Stalin*, explained his choice of title by saying that the Russian soul was Stalinist by nature, and that many Russians felt that the authorities had the right to do much more to people than was possible in the ‘civilized world’. According to Erofeyev, the son of Stalin’s interpreter, every Russian family was a kind of communist cell, where the father, just like Stalin, distributed the benefits. Not much has changed since.

This attitude has suited Putin well. State propaganda depicts Stalin as an ‘effective manager’, Stalinist historians like Starikov are invited onto popular TV shows, and books praising Stalin are sold in every bookshop in Moscow. But most importantly, Putin has adopted the paternalistic approach. This is most manifest in the televised shows in which he takes calls from citizens, afterwards immediately dispatching the local authorities to deal with callers’ complaints.

But amidst the new wave of affection for Stalin, another tyrant had started to gain popularity in the country. The first monument to Ivan the Terrible – depicting him on horseback holding a cross in his right hand – was erected three years ago in the city of Orel, 350 kilometres south of Moscow. In the sixteenth century, the notoriously brutal tsar expanded Russian territory by conquering Kazan and Siberia. He also used his personal guard (the *Oprichnina*) to crack down on the independent nobility and any kind of dissent. His guards were allowed to grab aristocrats’ lands and property on behalf of the state and to execute feudal lords – what many today take as a fight against elite corruption. The regional governor of Orel, Vadim Potomsky, has stressed that Ivan the Terrible not only expanded the Russian frontiers (and defended them), but that he also abolished the bribery of government officials. Although a group of local activists expressed outrage at the monument, a poll conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation showed that 71 per cent of Russians approved of Ivan the Terrible’s role in Russian history.

The demand for justice and equality, combined with growing dissatisfaction with Putin’s officials at both regional and federal levels, simmers below the surface of Russian society. But the popularity of Stalin and Ivan the Terrible leave few opportunities for a democratic solution to the problem. The concept of justice is problematic in itself. Bernard Lewis, the famous orientalist, said that in the Islamic Middle East, equality is well understood but that justice replaces the concept of freedom in the western sense. This observation could be applied to Russia, too.

Stalin, the first modern Russian leader to promote Ivan the Terrible, grasped pretty well that the demand for justice could be turned into support for repression. Times have changed, making mass repressions impossible, and Putin appreciates this. Instead, he has been busy for several years conducting selective repressions against the elites, imprisoning governors, ministers and high-ranking officials. However, to make people believe that justice can only be delivered by the national leader, one element is crucial – the enormous share of the state in society. And this is exactly what Putin achieved in the last decade.
The weaponization of society: The elites of today

It was a warm Moscow evening. In a well-maintained mansion surrounded by a fence and fir-trees, in a spacious room with a table and few chairs, tea was being served, along with some sweets. A conversation was underway. We had known one another for years and it was always great to have a chat once in a while. We had first met our interlocutor in the late 1990s, when he was in charge of the security of a big metal corporation run by a top oligarch. Back then, our friend’s main duty was to protect his boss’s assets from hostile takeover. That meant all kinds of things – from managing court proceedings to getting his managers out of prison and fending of raids on his factories by the mafia or heavily-armed special forces. With his background in intelligence, he was very efficient and knew how to serve his boss. That was why, twenty years later, he was still in the job, helping his oligarch protect his business – which was now an archipelago of companies spread across the whole country.

We talked at length about what bothered him most these days. It was no longer competing oligarchs or the mafia but Voennaya priemka or ‘military acceptance’ – in other words, requirements for equipment produced under a military contract. Western sanctions hit Russian business hard, but the isolation also opened up new opportunities. European and American companies could no longer compete for Russian military contracts, which gave Russian companies an advantage. As it happened, the sanctions were imposed when the Russian government was already pouring huge amounts of money into the Russian military-industrial complex. This coincidence had a triple effect. First, the Russian army went through a large-scale rearmament program – an effort that had been initiated in 2008 and that gave Putin the muscles he needed to show off on the international stage. Second, the Russian state found a new way to guarantee the loyalty of oligarchs like our friend’s boss: government funding via the military replaced lost opportunities to stay global. Lastly, military funding secured support from a sector crucial to the fabric of Russian society – the technical intelligentsia. It is this third effect that it perhaps the most interesting.

The Soviet Union had the biggest engineer community in the world. The reason was its huge military-industrial complex. To serve it, Stalin founded dozens of technical schools all over the country. For decades, Soviet engineers were schooled in technical subjects but rarely in the humanities; their education was extremely narrow. Unlike medical doctors, they were not schooled in ethics. Rather, they were taught to be technical servants of the state.

Thousands and thousands of engineers were trained. Soon, Soviet society became dominated by the technical intelligentsia it had produced – in fact, the country was run by engineers. In the 1960s and 1970s, so many top party and government functionaries had engineering backgrounds that American experts began to comment that an engineering education played the same role in the Soviet Union that a law or a business degree did in preparing people for leadership positions in the United States. [1]

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the old structure of society collapsed too. Engineers lost their funding from the military industrial complex and, as a result, their social status. Many of them found new jobs and opportunities in the fast-growing IT sector. Russia became one of very few countries in which internet companies competed
successfully with American tech giants (while also providing the best and brightest to criminal hacker groups). But no matter how successful they became in their new careers in IT and communications, many continued to bear a grudge. For these people, the collapse of the Soviet system and Russia’s loss of the superpower status was a personal tragedy.

The engineers sent their children to the same technical schools that they and their parents had attended, where new generations of engineers were trained by professors with a Soviet training and mentality. New generations of technical intelligentsia came onto the job market, joined Russian IT companies, aspired to work in Silicon Valley, spoke English and were well versed in western tech vocabulary. But deep down, they shared their parents’ grievance about their loss of social status. It was mostly harmless. They read reams of Russian sci-fi in which cunning Russian-Soviet hackers trounced the Americans, and that was it.

That lasted for a decade and, were it not for Putin, could possibly have lasted much longer. First, Putin turned grievance against the West into the new national idea. What, in the 1990s, was a sure sign of being a loser became a widely accepted and officially endorsed narrative. Second, Putin enabled the large-scale return of the military-industrial complex – and that meant contracts and jobs for the technical intelligentsia. It was a comprehensive effort. Not only did money start pouring into tech companies, but from 2012 on the military returned to the technical schools. Graduates now had a choice: either to go to some distant army unit in Siberia as a conscript or to join the cyber troops or ‘science troops’ deployed after 2014. But the army made it crystal clear – there was no longer any way to avoid military service.

This old Soviet scheme could work effectively on one condition – that the share of the state in the Russian economy kept growing. It sure did. In April 2019 the Federal Anti-Monopoly Service admitted that the share of the state in the Russian economy was between 60 and 70 per cent (in 2008 it was between 40 and 45%) and had already had a negative impact on competition.

When a significant part of the population is involved in the military build-up, the result is growing support for the use of weapons. Kremlin propaganda grasped this after the beginning of the Russian operation in Syria, when Russian military videos of missile launches on Syria went viral on YouTube. Given that the loss of superpower-status still hurts, one can easily understand why. In February 2019, the Ministry of Defence arranged a 28,000-kilometre-long travelling exhibition of tanks, guns and other military hardware seized from Syria, transported by train with 60 stops across the country, from Moscow to Vladivostok, including Crimea. Everywhere, it was met by jubilant crowds.

The established narrative in the expert community of a rich and liberal Moscow versus poor and backward regions supportive of hardliners is to some extent true. But every May, crowds of Muscovites line Tverskaya Street to watch Russian military equipment – tanks, missile launchers, armoured vehicles – being lined up before the 9 May parade on Red Square. Ultimately, people want to see all that military gear in action.

**What next: The good Putin?**
If there was an election tomorrow, who would you vote for? For almost twenty years, the answer to that question has been predictable. Four times this century, the majority of Russians have chosen Vladimir Putin. And once they voted for Dmitry Medvedev, knowing he was merely keeping the seat warm for Putin.

Liberal intellectuals were disappointed by such a homogenous landscape. Kremlin critics blamed it on the fact that independent candidates had not been allowed to participate in elections. This is certainly true. But it does not explain why Putin’s approval rating has been consistently very high, reaching 86 per cent following the annexation of Crimea in June 2014. Since the annexation it has never dropped below 80 per cent, even when western sanctions caused living conditions to worsen.

Therefore, the news that Russians’ trust in Putin had fallen to 31.7 per cent – a 13-year low – came as a shock both to the Kremlin and to the general public. The survey was published in May by the state-run pollster VTsIOM, an organization that could not be accused of disloyalty. Unsurprisingly, the Kremlin reacted immediately.

Putin still has five years to serve as leader of the country. But the news about his falling popularity made him anxious. Dmitry Peskov, Putin’s spokesman, demanded explanations: ‘We’re waiting for analysis by our respected specialists on how these data correlate.’ How, he asked ‘can trust levels fall but approval ratings rise?’ The hint was understood, and renewed poll data soon arrived. Within a week, VTsIOM published new figures. In the new report, trust in Putin skyrocketed to 72.3 percent.

It hardly fooled anyone. For the first time in many years, it became clear that Russians want a new president. Who might replace Putin is the billion-dollar question. But it’s hard to avoid the feeling that it might be a Good Putin, someone who promises to provide justice but is eager to exploit the irreversible changes that Putin has made in Russian society.

**Footnotes**