

the *Rusky mir*⁹ or its “sphere of identity”, Russian foreign policy contains an expansionist potential aimed at preserving influence over territories where compatriots live.

While the West was never fully willing or able to welcome Russia as equal partner, now some Western leaders have completely written-off the Putin regime.¹⁰ The Russian leadership, for its part, increasingly gave up

on the idea of Russia becoming a part of the West and “started creating their own Moscow-centered system”, as noted by Dmitri Trenin as early as 2006,¹¹ turning its attention more and more towards Russian compatriots in the former USSR. The incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation seems to be the last nail in the coffin of Moscow’s Westernizers.

About the Author

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9 Igor Zelev, “The new foreign policy doctrine of Russia”, *Vedomosti*, 07/04/2014, available at: <<http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/news/2014/04/07/24981841>>

10 Peter Baker, “In Cold War Echo, Obama Strategy writes off Putin”, *New York Times*, 20/04/2014.

11 Dmitri Trenin, “Russia Leaves the West”, in *Foreign Affairs* 85 (4) 2006, 85–96.

ANALYSIS

Taking the Shortcut to Popularity: How Putin’s Power is Sustained through Ukraine

By Bo Petersson, Malmö

Abstract

Putin has built his popularity on two incongruent myths: that Russia is an eternal great power and that the country is beset by cyclical periods of weakness. Putin’s popularity stands in contrast to the lack of legitimacy within Russia’s overall political system. Recently, Putin has used Ukraine to revive his popularity as his term in power stretches well beyond a decade, but it remains unclear what the cost of these actions will be.

Russia as a Great Power

Speaking about the purportedly poor condition of state museums in Crimea, which in mid-March 2014 had been annexed to the Russian Federation by almost unanimous votes in both houses of the Russian parliament, Russian President Vladimir Putin lamented on April 10, “Ukraine has its own problems; it even had its own ideology of development or, on the contrary, obliterating some of the common pages of our history. But what is entirely clear is that they need to be revived.”¹ On the same day, marking the 70th anniversary of its liberation from Nazi occupation, Putin issued a greeting to residents of the southern Ukrainian city of Odessa and to surviving WW II veterans there: “The President of Russia expressed his conviction that centuries-old traditions of good neighborliness and mutual support will continue to unite Russians and Ukrainians. He stressed that their common duty is to cherish the memory of the

past war, to thwart any attempt to rewrite history and to bring up the younger generation on the high ideals of patriotism and pride for our Great Victory.”²

Seen in the context of the generally tense situation between Russia and Ukraine, Putin’s words could certainly be interpreted as ominous. The small components of the language he used, such as “the common pages of our history” that “need to be revived,” “unite Russians and Ukrainians,” “thwart any attempt to rewrite history” (what parts of history?) and “pride for our Great Victory” all had the same connotations: scarce recognition by Russia of the sovereignty of Ukraine, and instead profuse references to Ukraine as destiny-bound to community with great-power Russia.

In this article I argue that Putin’s strong promotion of Russia’s annexation of Crimea and his hardline stance against Ukraine are highly consistent with the basic

1 <<http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/7001>> (accessed 16 April 2014).

2 <<http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/7000#sel=3:1,3:64>> (accessed 16 April 2014).

modes of legitimation that he has been using throughout his three presidential terms. His line of action is intimately bound up with his interpretation of Russia's role and privileges as a great power. This great power theme is closely linked to fundamental sentiments of Russian national identity and therefore highly popular among the public. Moreover, through his actions, Putin has demonstrated that he still is a formidable force to be reckoned with. The message is conveyed to the electorate that he is a strongman who is virtually irreplaceable at the helm of Russian state power. By many measures, Putin's personal popularity was waning at the beginning of his third presidential term in office, but the conflict with Ukraine will at least in the short-term mean a boost for his domestic popularity.

Putin the Myth-Maker

All nations, big and small, tend to have political myths that promote ideational unity and cohesiveness among their populations. These myths confer legitimacy on political leaders who act upon them in resonance with public sentiments. Whether the myths are true or false is not important for the analysis, but the main thing is that they express naturalized, taken-for-granted cultural knowledge in the Barthesian sense of the word.³

Ever since he first became president in 1999/2000, Putin has been extremely successful at building his popularity on the basis of two predominant Russian political myths: about Russia as an eternal great power, regardless of the circumstances, and about Russia as regularly beset by cyclically recurring periods of weakness (*smuta*, Time of Troubles).⁴ These periods are eventually overcome by the people who unite behind a great leader and act to throw insurgents and foreign schemers out. Thanks to this leader, who emerges on the stage in the nick of time, Russia is again resurrected to its great power status.

Putin has skillfully depicted himself as the personification of both myths, as the guarantor in the first place, and as the great savior in the other. Thanks to his exploitation of this basis of legitimacy, Putin has almost consistently had stunningly high popularity ratings, often above 80 percent, but never less than 65.⁵

The imagery of Russia as an eternal great power has been used by Putin for both legitimizing and mobilizing purposes. In the early days of his first presidency, he stated that "either Russia will be great or it will not be at all," and, in an interview with a Western newspa-

per, he indignantly retorted that Russia is not claiming great power status, but *is* a great power by virtue of its huge potential, history and culture. Since great power status is an elusive quality at all times, what Putin seems to be striving for is being treated as an equal by other great powers and a status that is second to none in the international arena.

The paradigmatic Time of Troubles took place between 1598 and 1613, but according to contemporary political discourse in Russia, the most recent *smuta* coincided with Boris Yeltsin's presidencies in the 1990s. According to this contemporary mythology, Putin personified its successful ending. The 1990s were a period of humiliating economic and political weakness and protracted internal unrest, with the civil war in Chechnya as the most obvious example. When taking up the presidency, Putin declared that "the state has to be strong, but it has become weak," and from his first day in office he started to act accordingly. Concepts like "dictatorship of the law" and "sovereign democracy" were launched with great determination during his first presidency, underlining Putin's ambition to strengthen order inside Russia, make the country respected again, and demonstrate that it was its own master, beholden to no one.

During the first half of the 2000s, Putin was extremely lucky with timing. His first presidential tenure coincided with unprecedented jumps in oil and gas prices, and as a major exporter of these strategic commodities, Russia benefited greatly from the development. To use a popular expression frequently employed among Russia analysts at the time, Russia had established itself as an energy superpower, wielding key economic and political influence over transit and consumer countries in Europe. The newfound energy wealth meant that Putin could kick-start his presidency economically, and from the point of view of the public, it would seem as though Russia, thanks to him, had finally, after the chaos of the 1990s, made it back to the ranks of the great powers at break-neck speed. Consequently, Putin earned solid popularity as the man who restored Russia to greatness and kept it there.

The Popularity-Legitimacy Paradox

There is, however, a fundamental distinction to be borne in mind between popularity and legitimacy, whereby legitimacy is considered as the more diffuse, but also more sustainable, popular trust in the basic institutions of the political system. Several scholars specializing in Russian politics have observed a paradox whereby Putin's personal popularity ratings remain high, but popular faith and trust in the fundamental institutions of the Russian political system, including the presidency as

3 Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.

4 Petersson, Bo. "Still Embodying the Myth?", *Problems of Post-Communism* 61.1 (2014): 30–40.

5 <<http://www.levada.ru/indeksy>> (accessed 17 April 2014).

such, are chronically low.⁶ This is a situation that can turn out to be problematic in many ways. As Vladimir Gel'man⁷ has suggested, Putin's high popularity ratings may actually inhibit the development in Russia of more long-term legitimacy in the Weberian sense.

However, even though Putin's exploitation of the great power and the restoration-of-order myths was undoubtedly successful, there are formidable problems to be encountered with regard to the tension between popularity and legitimacy. If Putin ceases to deliver the economic goods and times get rough for the electorate and/or his personal popularity wanes while trust in state institutions remains low, the system will come under considerable strain. Already the financial crisis from 2007 onwards meant a heavy burden for the Russian economy, and even if the Putin administration was quick to try to shift all the blame onto the United States, there was no doubt that Russia was affected. Also, the combination of extreme personal popularity and limited systemic legitimacy makes for a possible power vacuum once Putin eventually leaves office. Who is to succeed him and who can ever step into his shoes to secure greatness and order? However, right now that day seems to be distant. The concern is no doubt with the present.

Fighting the Stagnation Specter

After Putin's return to presidential power following the Medvedev interlude a lingering question arose: For how long can the old recipes work? Putin, born in 1952, did not seem to come across as resourceful and energetic anymore. Instead, he had become synonymous with the system. In the words of Ben Judah, dynamic Putinism was becoming replaced by stagnant Putinism.⁸ Tellingly, after the end of the presidential elections in 2012, Putin argued indignantly that the opposition wanted to reinstate chaos in Russian politics and wished to "usurp power," thus suggesting that it was his personal privilege to uphold the presidency. There seemed to be rich evidence of sclerosis.

The deal in 2011 between then President Medvedev and then Prime Minister Putin to switch places with each other did nothing to alleviate the impression of a political elite set on preserving its hold on power at all costs. The demonstrations that followed in the big metropolises showed that the tandem's ways of rigging

the system had little support. Even if Putin's popularity index by international comparison had not fallen to any disastrous levels, the tendency towards decline was, according to the monthly polls by the Levada Center, steady and apparent: from a protracted peak of close to 90 percent approval rates in 2007–2008 to ratings situated in the low or mid-60s rather consistently from the spring of 2012 on.⁹ For a political leader embedded in a political system enjoying institutionalized public trust, this figure would have been no problem, but for someone clearly constructing his power basis on personal popularity, it represented a worrying trend.

At this point it seemed as if Putin balanced between stressing stability and order, on the one hand, and nurturing stagnation, on the other. The specter of Brezhnev-like sclerosis was frequently discussed among political analysts abroad, and Putin was ever more often mocked in Russian social media. The first months of his third presidency again signaled inertia. In the President's annual address to the Federal Assembly, delivered in December 2012, grand visions were conspicuously absent. Instead there were plenty of self-congratulatory reminders of what had already been achieved in the 2000s: internal order had been re-established, and Russia was again a strong power to be reckoned with. Old wine was poured into old bottles.

Ukraine: Consolidating Putin's Power

No doubt Putin and his advisors were keenly aware of this dilemma. The Sochi Olympics in February 2014 meant an opportunity to showcase newfound vitality. Even more so, the situation unfolding in Ukraine and the power vacuum after the downfall of president Yanukovich offered a chance to change the equation and counteract both the pattern of stagnation and the declining personal popularity rates.

In any case, it can be said that today, in connection with the acute crisis over Crimea and Ukraine, the old magic seems again to be working for Putin; his popularity ratings are rising steeply, past the 80-percent threshold and apparently only knowing the sky as their limit.¹⁰ Putin again appears as the man who delivers the goods, talks and acts tough against his opponents at home and abroad, and upholds Russia's reputation as a great power which demands to be treated with awe and respect. At the same time, he has seemed to disprove the predictions that Russia is entering another period of stagnation; Putin is projected as forever strong, and so is Russia. Just like he managed to lay the foundation of his spectacular and enduring popularity through his hard

6 Sil, Rudra, and Cheng Chen. "State Legitimacy and the (In) significance of Democracy in Post-Communist Russia." *Europe-Asia Studies* 56.3 (2004): 347–368.

7 Gel'man, Vladimir. "Regime changes despite legitimacy crises: Exit, voice, and loyalty in post-communist Russia." *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 1.1 (2010): 54–63.

8 Judah, Ben. *Fragile Empire: How Russia Fell in and Out of Love with Vladimir Putin*. Yale University Press, 2013.

9 <<http://www.levada.ru/indeksy>> (accessed 17 April 2014)

10 <<http://www.levada.ru/indeksy>> (accessed 17 April 2014)

and uncompromising line against secessionist Chechnya in the late 1990s and early 2000s, he now seems to be consolidating and extending his popular mandate by flexing great-power muscle against Ukraine and demonstrating that Russia does not flinch in the face of Western sanctions.

The annexation of Crimea and the tensed relations with Ukraine have therefore, no matter how deplorable

they are for Western democracies, added new elements of vitality to Putin's power base. Putin has advanced his position and his personal popularity has no doubt been strengthened in the short run. For Ukraine the price is high. For Russia itself and the surrounding world, the final price tag is unknown as yet, but the increasingly used expression about this time being the New Cold War does suggest that the development does not come for free.

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ANALYSIS

The Return of Ideology—Russia's New Sense of Mission¹

By Jens Siegert, Moscow

Abstract

Since returning to the Kremlin, Putin and his regime have moved away from the informal “social contract” of the 2000s, in which the state refrained from playing a role in shaping people's lives towards promoting a neo-ideology—a crude mixture of a sense of threat from and resentment towards the foreign and the human, neo-religious bigotry and an anti-Western and anti-modernizing geopolitical world view. While this neo-ideology may secure the regime a few additional years in power, it is likely to lead the country into decline, as it is scaring off exactly those people—the young, (well-)educated, mobile and entrepreneurial—needed to modernize Russia.

An important differentiating characteristic between the Soviet Union and Putin's Russia was, until recently, the widespread freedom of its people to define their lives as they wish. This freedom, the freedom to think what you want and to say what you think, to travel where you want to go, return when you like, to live with whom you wish, to love whom you wish, to work where you wish (all within the framework of given social and economic possibilities, naturally) was, moreover, a part of the often discussed (even though it was not set out in writing) “social contract” of the 2000s. According to this “contract”, Putin determines politics and controls the most important economic resources. But he also cares for the growing prosperity of as many people as possible, does not interfere in the private lives of his citizens, and does not interfere in what they think and believe.¹

Putin once even spoke of this last part of the “social contract” himself. In his first speech on the “state of the

nation” in front of both chambers of parliament in July 2000, he explained that he was “against the reintroduction of an official ideology in Russia in any form whatsoever.” There have been, time and time again since then, moments of temptation, above all in the case of recent history, to prescribe or forbid something or other. But on the whole, Putin kept his promise.

He probably actually believed that things are better that way (also, or perhaps above all, for himself). Because it is only in this combination that both strands of his power basis hold together: on one side the so-called “Gosudarstvenniki” (from Gosudarstvo—the state), those who always put the interests of the state first (it is towards these who Putin himself very obviously leans, ideologically and biographically). They stand for the “rise of the Russian state from its knees,” for a more self-aware policy towards the West, for the uncompromising approach in the second war with Chechnya and also for the gradually strengthening of limitations on citizens' participation rights. They now, unanimously, support the annexation of the Crimea peninsula and certainly will support further steps to destabilize the Ukraine as a whole.

¹ This article is a slightly revised and updated version of that found on Rights in Russia, which is available at: <<http://www.rightsinrussia.info/archive/comment/siegert/obscurantism>>