



PUTINISM: THE IDEOLOGY

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Back during the Cold War, when the politics of the Kremlin were opaque, journalists and analysts often became obsessed with the personality of the leader of Russia, speculating about his taste in whiskey or suits, tracking his wife's fashion sense or lack of it, hoping that would give them some clue about his policies. Times have changed, but the personality and beliefs of Vladimir Putin, the current Russian president, still matter just as much as those of his predecessors - if not more. In a state where authority is still vested in personalities, not in institutions, the Russian president's vision of his country, his understanding of its history, his training as a KGB officer and his personal experience of life in the Soviet Union now have an incalculable impact on Russian political life.

Indeed, the first clues to his character emerged early on, back when he was still prime minister, during the presidency of Boris Yeltsin. Soon after his appointment, Putin made a visit to the Lubyanka in Moscow. Once the headquarters of the KGB and its most notorious jail, the Lubyanka is now the home of the FSB, Russia's internal security services, an institution which Putin himself directed before being asked to run the government. Putin visited the Lubyanka in 1999 on December 20th, a day still known and still celebrated in Russia as 'Chekists Day', the anniversary (that was the 82nd) of the founding of the Cheka, Lenin's secret police. In that place and on that day, both so redolent of the bloodiest pages of Russian history, Putin solemnly unveiled a plaque in memory of Yuri Andropov. This was not an accidental gesture. Later, as president, Putin ordered another plaque placed on the Moscow building where Andropov had lived. He also erected a statue to him in a St. Petersburg suburb.

For Putin, a man who pays extensive lip service to the theory of democratic elections, Andropov would seem an odd hero. Andropov was the longest serving director of the KGB, holding that office from 1967 until 1982, the year when he briefly became General Secretary of the Communist Party. Unlike some of his predecessors, Andropov was not just some faceless apparatchik: he had a very straightforward theory of governance.

In Soviet terms, he was a moderniser - but not a democrat. On the contrary, having been the Russian ambassador to Budapest during the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, Andropov understood very precisely the danger which 'democrats' and other free-thinking and self-organising groups posed to totalitarian regimes. Yet he also understood, like everyone else in the KGB, that the Soviet economy was lagging far behind that of the West. By time of his death, he came to the conclusion that 'order and discipline', as enforced by the methods of the KGB – the fight against alcoholism, laziness and corruption, coupled with the use of carefully targeted violence against dissidents, - would restore the sagging fortunes of the Soviet economy.

Vladimir Putin not only came of age in Andropov's KGB, an organisation he first tried to join at the age of fifteen, but also shared some life experiences with the man who later became his hero. As ambassador to Budapest, Andropov had been shocked when young Hungarians first called for democracy, then protested against the communist establishment - and then took up arms against the regime and lynched several secret policemen. Putin had a similar experience in Dresden, in 1989, where he witnessed mass street protests and the ransacking of the headquarters of the Stasi, the East German secret police. German colleagues of his, he recalled years later, had suddenly lost their jobs and their privileges from one day to the next. It was shocking.

Both men drew the same conclusion from these traumatic experiences: Talk of democracy leads to protest; protest leads to attacks on the Chekists. It is better to stop all talk of democracy before it goes any further. As a result, 'order and discipline' are nowadays words in Putin's vocabulary too.

This is not to say that Putin is Andropov, or that Putin wants to bring back the Soviet Union. But it does mean that Putin – and, more importantly, most of the people around him - is deeply steeped in the culture of Andropov's KGB. What does this mean in practice? At the most fundamental level, he and the people around him deeply believe that the rulers of the state must exert careful control over the life of the nation. Events cannot be allowed just to happen, they must be controlled and manipulated. By the same token, markets cannot be genuinely open, elections cannot be unpredictable and the modern equivalent of the Soviet dissidents – the small groups of activists who oppose centralised Kremlin rule – must be carefully controlled through legal pressure, public propaganda and, if necessary, carefully targeted violence.

Just like their Soviet predecessors, Putin and the men around him also assume that anyone not supportive of their regime is by definition suspicious, and probably a foreign spy. At a rally as long ago as 2007, Putin declared: 'Unfortunately, there are still those people in our country who act like jackals at foreign embassies...who count on the support of foreign friends and foreign governments but not on the support of their own people'. This was a direct warning to Russia's few remaining human rights and trade union activists. It was also a comforting signal to Putin's followers, who continue to believe, like Soviet secret policemen before them, that all important decisions should be made in Moscow by a small unelected group of people who know how to resist these foreign conspiracies.

His concern about foreign influence has not faded during his years in power. On the contrary, on the night of his third and most recent re-election to the presidency last year, Putin described the protestors who had thronged the streets of Moscow for a few weeks in the previous winter in stark terms as he declared victory. He declared his victory in the election with great passion:

We showed that our people can distinguish between the desire for renewal and a political provocation that has only one goal: To destroy Russian statehood and usurp power.

Putin doesn't merely dislike his would-be democratic opponents; he believes that they are sinister agents of foreign powers. He does not just object to the liberal political system they claim to support, he believes they are plotting to 'destroy Russian statehood', 'usurp power' and hand the country over to rapacious outsiders. It would be a mistake to believe that this kind of talk is mere propaganda. In the past few years, as historians have had more access to Russian archives, it has become ever more clear that Soviet leaders meant what they said, even when they were using what sounded like absurdly ideological language. Without evidence to the contrary, it is safe to assume that Putin also means what he says.

While Putin's character and life experiences are fascinating (as is the language he chooses to use), these things are only important because they facilitate a better understanding of the nature of the regime which he created. This is a man who held influential positions in the 1990s – head of the former KGB, prime minister – and who has, in practice, functioned as the country's leading politician since 2000. His interpretation of the constitution would allow him to remain in office for eleven more years, until 2024. He may well have the chance to dominate Russian politics for a full quarter century.

Some have used the expression 'managed democracy' when looking for a way to explain the system he has created. Others refer to it as 'corporate capitalism'. The argument presented here is that the system is a bit of both, and that it is closely aligned to the culture of the 1980s KGB from which Putin emerged. As such, I will call it: 'Putinism – the ideology'.

The word 'ideology' is being used here with great deliberation, as this is a carefully worked out system, with carefully designed institutions. It is deliberately taught to Russian children, promulgated to the voting public and propagated in the media. It is the basis for Russian foreign policy, and it comes complete with an interpretation of the past and predictions for the future. It even has an ostensible goal: it proposes to make Russia strong and feared again, and it promises to protect the power and wealth of Russia's current ruling class. It is not immutable. On the contrary, it changes under the pressure of events, just as Marxist-Leninism once did. At the moment, it is realigning itself to cope with the fact of the new Russian opposition.

What is Putinism? Clearly, its most central element, at least until now, has been the carefully managed electoral process, the managed political parties which take part in that process and the managed results. There is nothing remotely unique, or especially Russian, about falsified elections. Such things have also been known to happen in the most democratic of democracies. Nor is the phenomenon of a leader anointing his successor completely unheard of either. One needs to look no further than Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

Yet, the Russian manipulation of political outcomes has gone far deeper. Even Gordon Brown eventually had to face his electorate. In Russia, voters are at no stage allowed to intervene in the democratic process. There are no accidental victors in Russian elections – because there are no accidental candidates.

Instead, the semblance of choice is carefully preserved, not only through the advance choice of the winner, but also through the advance choice of his opponents. As they do not want Russia to appear to be a one-party state, the Kremlin ensures there are always several candidates from several parties. Some of these parties have been especially created to look like opponents of the status quo. The revival of the fake opposition party, a phenomenon familiar from communist Eastern Europe, is one of Putinism's great contributions to modern political life.

The best example is one of the most famous: Vladimir Zhirinovsky's so-called Liberal Democrats, a group which routinely won parliamentary seats by sounding more nationalist and more extreme than the mainstream Kremlin parties, but somehow always voted with the Kremlin. More recently, the Kremlin has tolerated weak opponents such as the oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov, who was allowed to stand against Putin in recent elections, though he had no chance of success.

The Kremlin's genuine opponents have been marginalised, beaten up at demonstrations, jailed, harassed and insulted. The Other Russia, the political grouping created by former chess champion Garry Kasparov, was once described on the state-owned website Pravda.ru as a 'motley army of deviants, criminals, wannabe politicians, fraudsters and gangsters on the fringes of Russian society'. More recently, following demonstrations last winter, judges have handed down over a jail terms to political demonstrators for plotting 'mass unrest'.

Policemen have raided the homes of opposition leaders and lawmakers have increased fines for 'illegal protests', re-criminalised libel and expanded legal definitions of 'treason' in order to control their opponents.

Putinism has long had ambitions beyond the mere creation of political parties. It also aims to create organisations that in the West are referred to as civil society or sometimes non-governmental organisations (CSOs and NGOs, respectively). As stated previously, because of their background and training, the men around Putin view all kinds of environmental, educational and charitable institutions not as a normal aspect of a functioning democracy, but as evidence of secret networks that probably involve Western spies. At the same time, the Kremlin has encouraged state-controlled youth groups, state controlled trade unions and even state controlled organisations dedicated to the promotion of democracy. Several years ago, I was asked by an acquaintance at the US embassy in Moscow to speak at a seminar on civic education for high school teachers, being held at something called the Institute for Democracy. After presenting a short speech on Western journalism, the audience began to ask aggressive questions. The first questioner asked 'why America supports Chechen terrorism'. Another asked how a representative of the Washington Post – widely known to be a US government-controlled newspaper and a mouthpiece of the White House - dared to speak about the free press.

The audience went on, parroting an extreme version of the neo-communist propaganda which occasionally appears in the Russian press. Afterwards, I asked the organiser to explain the origins of the Institute for Democracy. It was, she replied, an older organisation formerly known in Soviet times as the Institute for World Peace. Though it had a new title, it was under the same direction, and operated according to the same principles: It 'taught' students to follow whatever government line was currently in fashion. Once, that was international communism. Now, it's democracy.

The perks proffered by the Institute for Democracy – a free trip to Moscow, free meals, maybe a stipend – must have encouraged many of the participants, provincial high school teachers, to attend the seminar. But they probably made an ideological decision as well. They came from that part of society which believes, like Putin's entourage that prefers the more orderly world of state-organised civic society to unconstrained individual liberty, and that non-government groups who promote democracy are, by definition, Western spies.

The same group of people are also no doubt attracted to another, equally original element of Putinism, namely the managed press. In his media policy, the Russian president has, at least for the most part, deviated from the methods of Andropov, who simply locked up all of his critics. Nowadays, the system is different. Theoretically the press is free – up to a point. One can, for example, publish a small, independent newspaper, as long as it remains very small. One can function as an independent journalist, so long as one doesn't publish anything that truly endangers the status quo.

Nevertheless, there are limits. For just as the press knows it has a certain sphere of freedom, it also knows that if their circulation grows too high, or reporters' questions become too uncomfortable, official attitudes will change. Some years ago, when travelling in the Volgograd region, I encountered a young woman journalist who worked a local TV station, owned by the regional government (as are most local TV stations in Russia). She talked enthusiastically about press freedom and all of the opportunities open to young journalists. Yet, after being asked what would happen if she broadcast something critical of the governor, the woman replied: 'They would shut us down'.

Sometimes controls are even less subtle. *Novaya Gazeta*, the one Moscow newspaper which still criticises Putin, has had its journalists beaten up, its offices broken into, its accounts audited again and again. Anna Politkovskaya, *Novaya Gazeta*'s most famous and most talented reporter, was murdered several years ago in the stairwell of her own apartment building in the middle of the day. With tactics like that, there is no need to shut many newspapers down.

The Politkovskaya case illustrates very well how Putinism works: it doesn't eliminate all real political opponents, it only eliminates those who become too famous or too popular. It doesn't use mass violence, instead it uses targeted violence, on the grounds that the arrest or murder of a single person is often enough to scare hundreds of others. Politkovskaya was allowed to function for many years, but was killed when her investigations brought her too close to the truth about Putin and the Chechen War. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the oil magnate, was allowed to get rich, but arrested when his money made him too independent. The women of Pussy Riot were allowed to stage protests, but when they began to attract real notoriety they were sent to labour camps. Thus, at least until recently, Putin was able to exercise greater control over the remaining oligarchs, the remaining journalists and the remaining protestors. Without Stalin-style mass arrests, would-be regime opponents are intimidated into silence and cooperation. No one wants to share the fate of Politkovskaya, Khodorkovsky or the Pussy Riot women in Siberia.

The Putinist ideology does not operate in a vacuum. As Marx said, base determines superstructure, and there is no doubt about the fact that Russia's carefully managed democracy is fuelled, funded and supported by a carefully managed economy. It is, and has been since 1991, a mistake to call this system 'capitalist', though it possesses some apparently capitalist institutions, such as a stock market and banks. The resemblance is superficial. In truth, Russia is not a capitalist society at all. It is a rent-seeking oil economy, one which resembles Saudi Arabia far more than that of the United States or Western Europe.

Even as an oil economy, Russia is an original one with distinctly Putinist elements. As in Saudi Arabia, the nation's largest companies and banks Gazprom, Lukoil, Rosneft – are owned by a small group of people. Yet these owners are not an official ruling family, like the House of Saud. Instead, they are a subset of Putin's inner circle. Some of them hold double jobs, as government officials and captains of industry. Other magnates share their wealth with the

politicians in order to stay on top. Economics is politics, and vice versa, though not always in any transparent manner. Oligarchs can and do fall out of favour - the richest men in Russia today are not the same as they were ten years ago – but it isn't always clear how or why.

Since taking power, Putin has taken this system, first created by Yeltsin, and turned it in his favour. Although he sometimes speaks of economic 'reform', he is not interested in creating a legal system which would encourage entrepreneurship on a broad scale, or a banking system that would help small and medium sized enterprises grow. Instead, he has presided over an enormous transfer of assets, from the state and from other oligarchs to his friends and probably himself. The trial of Boris Berezovsky vs Roman Abramovich, staged in London last year, was in essence the public airing of the bitter dispute between a Yeltsin-era oligarch who lost much of his fortune to a Putin-era oligarch.

Yet, if Putin and his friends have made themselves rich, if they control the print and television media, if they control the police and the army, why does the Russian president bother with the fiction of democracy? Given their wealth, power and apparent security, why should Putin, Medvedev and the ex-KGB men around them need all of these elaborate games and facades? Why did Putin hold elections at all? Why didn't he just appoint himself president? Why maintain all of this pretence?

The answer is key to understanding the nature of this regime. Putin's goal is to maintain the dominance of his clique. For some time now, the ex-KGB inner circle has believed that the greatest threat to this power and this money is not the West, but Western democracy rhetoric. Putin and Medvedev do not seriously fear western military attacks, but they do fear popular discontent, public questioning of their personal wealth, open criticism of the basic tenets of Putinism and, of course, political demonstrations of the sort that created the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and which followed Russian parliamentary elections in the winter of 2011.

To stave these things off, they believe they must work hard to maintain their legitimacy, both at home and abroad. During his 2008 campaign, Medvedev did not travel around the country and he did not meet with supporters. Nevertheless, a campaign atmosphere was created: people were encouraged to vote, the media covered the election 'story', and all of the trappings of democracy were present even though there was no doubt about who would win. The same thing happened in 2012. Putin refused to take part in debates on the grounds that to do so would 'impede his ability to duly carry out his duties', in the words of his spokesman. Yet the 'campaign' was a matter of public discussion and debate. For all of his professional wariness of the real thing, Putin continues to adhere, in word if not in spirit, to the language and to the appearances of democracy. Indeed, appearances matter to him enormously – the appearance of democratic politics, democratic discourse and capitalist economics - and it is this which gives his regime its novel and deceptively powerful ideological edge.

The need for legitimacy had also inspired some of Putin's harsher rhetoric about the West, and especially about the United States. More than once, he has accused the United States of encouraging the spread of weapons of mass destruction and encouraging terrorism. He has openly compared America to Nazi Germany. He has recently set up an institution designed to monitor democracy in the United States, and frequently accuses both Americans and Western Europeans, especially the British, of hypocrisy and human rights violations. This rhetoric serves several purposes, but above all it is designed to inoculate the Russian public against the example of more open societies. Underlining this rhetoric is a Putinist interpretation of history. Famously, the ex-Russian president once described the breakup of the Soviet Union as 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century'. He has also displayed Soviet flags in anniversary parades, and brought a 'neutral' version of the history of Stalinism to Russian textbooks. More importantly, Putin has spent the past decade trying to promulgate an alternate post-Soviet history. In his version, 1989 was not a moment of liberation, but the beginning of economic collapse. The hardships and deprivations which Russians experienced during the 1990s were not the result of decades of communist neglect and widespread theft but of Western-style capitalism and democracy. Communism was stable and safe; post-communism has been a disaster. The Soviet Union was great; Russia was, until Putin's arrival, a failure. The Soviet empire, launched in 1945, was a moment of triumph to be remembered proudly, and the blood and terror required to achieve it are forgotten. The more people believe all of this, the less likely they are to want a system which is more genuinely democratic and genuinely capitalist. The more nostalgia for Soviet-era symbols – especially imperial symbols from the year 1945 – the more secure the KGB clique is going to be.

This context makes Putin's harsher verbal attacks on some of Russia's neighbours easier to understand. In the past, his most vitriolic rhetoric has been reserved for those countries which have most successfully navigated the path from communism to democracy, and which maintain the most open and pro-Western political systems: Poland, Estonia, Georgia and, at least until its most recent elections, Ukraine. It is highly improbable, for example, that Putin actually feared the missile defence shield that President Bush wanted to place in Poland, and impossible to believe that he was truly intimidated by NATO's relationship with Georgia. But he is afraid of the example set by these countries, since they challenge his own country's geopolitical choices, and American support for them infuriates him.

Russia's foreign policy towards the post-Arab-spring Middle East is also dictated, in part, by concerns for legitimacy at home. Russia's behaviour in Syria is in this sense highly ideological. Although Russian diplomats are openly contemptuous of Assad, and although Russian economic interests in Syria are in fact very narrow, the Russian government, in the wake of the successful Libyan revolution, does not want to see another authoritarian state toppled by a popular opposition. It's too close to home. Nor does it want to see another 'victory' for the Western democracies, or for what might be broadly understood as a Western political movement. That undermines its own authority.

Russia is not alone in fearing the democratic example of the West, and in preferring, therefore, to see authoritarian regimes around the world succeed. Although a lot of guff is spoken about Russia's lack of 'soft power', Putinism does have a great deal of appeal as an economic and political model, especially in Central Asia – Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan – but also in Iran, in Venezuela and elsewhere. The Iranian president, Ahmedinijad, took a leaf out of Putin's book a few years ago when he held an academic conference in Tehran to discuss the Holocaust, and invited a number of famous Holocaust deniers. He declared the conference 'an opportunity for thinkers who cannot express their views freely in Europe about the Holocaust'. If the West is going to shelter Iranian dissidents, in other words, then Iran will shelter David Irving and David Duke, just as Russia will sponsor investigations of democratic practices in the United States.

Putinist politicians and businessmen have also tried, with notable success, to gain influence abroad through the spread of Putinist-style corruption. Often they do so with the help of Russian oil and gas companies. At the moment Russia's Lukoil controls refineries in Ukraine, Bulgaria and Romania, and has assets in Greece and the former Yugoslavia. Gazprom now owns the Serbian national oil company - openly purchased with an eye to the influence it would bring - as well as a third of the Portuguese gas company Galp Energia. It has close ties with the Austrian energy giant OMV, and a strong relationship with Ruhrgas in Germany. These are not purely economic relationships. In every single country where they have invested, the Russian oil and gas oligarchs have not only lobbied for financial and banking regulations which will be favourable to their interests, both offshore and in Russia, but have also used their money to influence foreign politicians. Famously, even a German Chancellor, Gerhard Schroeder, was induced to go and work for Gazprom immediately upon leaving office.

This is how Putinism attempts to preserve itself at home, promote itself abroad, and protect the wealth and power of its leaders. And yet, the ultimate test of an ideology is not whether it can work for a brief period of time, but where it can last. First years ago, one could have argued that it absolutely can. With energy prices still rising, and the media monopoly firmly in place, there seemed no reason to doubt it.

However, the events of the past eighteen months have raised questions about the durability of Putinism. In recent years, the building blocks of Putinism have begun to look weaker. Clearly the growth of the internet has helped to undermine Putin's monopoly on the media. Partly as a result, the 'managed elections' once accepted by Russians without apparent comment, have sparked a series of open protests. It is harder to fool this generation of Russians, or at least harder to get them to roll their eyes and ignore obviously falsified elections. At the same time, Putin's fake political party and his fake civil society organisations have more recently attracted opprobrium rather than new members, as they are associated with official corruption. As a result of these changes,

a new Russian opposition has emerged. Unlike its predecessors, its rhetoric and energy are focused not on ideas about human rights, but on corruption, government theft and the lack of transparency in the government and the economy – precisely the things which Putinism depends upon to survive.

Meanwhile, the implicit promise of Putinism – the offer of stability and a slowly rising standard of living in exchange for the freedom to rule – has been eroded by much slower growth in parts of the country. A major drop in oil prices would accelerate this process, because it would deprive the Russian state budget of most of its revenues. If the dramatic fall in gas prices in the United States heralds a real change in Europe, some of Russia's ability to influence the political views of its neighbours might change as well. Certainly the uptick in violence, the harsher legal methods and the extremely harsh language Putin has used in recent months against the new political opposition indicate that he, too, is worried: 'managed democracy' was supposed to keep these kinds of movements weak and fragmented.

What can be done to help this new opposition? Frankly, not much – our ability to alter the course of internal events in Russia is and always has been limited. Still, the fact that we have very little influence on the future of Putinism doesn't mean that we have to go along with its central tenet: we do not have to pretend, as the Russian political elite does, that Russia is a democracy, or that Russia is a 'normal' member of the international community. We do not have to accept its descriptions of NGOs as foreign agents. We do not even have to allow Russia to remain a member of the G-8, historically a club for rich democracies. Originally, Russia was allowed to attend its meetings on the muddled theory that this would help Russia become a democracy. It did not. Why not end the pretence? The point here is that our standards should remain our standards, and our language should remain uncorrupted.

But even if we can't do much, the Russians can do a great deal, and I hope we don't make the mistake of underestimating them. The past twenty years have showed that in Eastern Europe, no country is incapable of change. Sooner or later, the generation trained in the mindset of Andropov's KGB will retire. Sooner or later, younger Russians will draw lessons not from the experience of the 1990s, but from the experience of the 2000s. There is no guarantee this new generation will be better, but it will be different. Perhaps, in this context, we should all remember the words of an ancient Slavic proverb: 'where there is death, there is hope'. ■

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For too long, Vladimir Putin was dismissed as a thuggish or thoughtless authoritarian leader. But the institutional and ideological underpinnings of Putinism are in fact quite sophisticated and are becoming more so with time. Containing elements of managed democracy and of corporate capitalism - and reflecting the culture and values of the 1980s KGB - Putinism is now taught to Russian children and propagated in the media. It comes complete with a foreign policy and an interpretation of recent history, and it has an ostensible goal: Along with protecting the power and wealth of Putin and his inner circle it proposes to make Russia strong and feared again.



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