

An Outline of Putin's Success: Authoritarianism, Tradition and the Survival of Russia

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I.

In 1994, the western-backed President Boris Yeltsin, in the midst of the economic collapse, called for a “strong state” in Russia. This was because the state remained the only organized power to stop the looting of the economy by a handful of oligarchs who then founded and funded their own political parties. He saw chaos and instability everywhere, and therefore, called on the consolidating of state forces. This is not authoritarianism, but an emergency that calls for the development of a functional state system in the midst of chaos.

Russia is a functional democracy (albeit not a liberal one) with a popular president. She has a great degree of public debate over many issues. She has 4 or 5 major political parties running in every election. Russia's economic success since Putin's recentralization of the state is undeniable, suggesting that his policies were basically correct under the circumstances. As Russian authors Guriev and Tsyvinsky state,

The reformers' arguments eventually gained ground: most of Vladimir Putin's reforms during his first presidential term were promoted and even designed by the new capitalists. Private land ownership was introduced, the tax system was streamlined, the business environment was deregulated, a stabilization fund was created, deposit insurance was implemented, and credit-history bureaus were established.

These two authors are not cheerleaders for Putin, and criticize him often. The point was that Putin's reforms were needed under the circumstances and therefore, it is a rational response to chaos. There is no destiny here. Russian political institutions have a history of democratic governance: the peasant commune, the *zemstvo* (county government) of the Tsarist era, and the Tsarist court system were all elected bodies. The policies of Putin reversed the destruction of mass privatization of Russian industries. This is why they remain popular today.

II.

Putin's goals were achieved one by one. He sealed off Russia's southern border in the Caucasus, preventing the radical Islamic movement from penetrating into Dagestan. Part of this process was made possible early on by the slow integration of the CIS as some sort of semi-confederation.

He properly identified a major source of corruption as the secret world of local government. In clipping the wings of former party hacks and bring more power to Moscow, regularity and law was reimposed in the municipalities. Even at a rudimentary level, this is an improvement of Herculean status. In connecting federal policy to the security systems in the districts, connection he streamlined law enforcement and removed careerists. The substantial and comprehensive reform of the security apparatus was essential. Keep in mind that law enforcement was mere theory in 1995. Since policy was now tied to the central government, it was more transparent, and officials in charge of success or failure can be identified.

Needless to say yet again, but Putin broke the non-democratic, extremely authoritarian and amoral oligarchy in the media, manufacturing and, significantly, petroleum. While the

west, urged on by powerful financial and energy capital, pompously decried a set of policy initiatives they neither understood nor appreciated, Putin's popularity soared.

In articulating the Eurasian idea, the non-aligned movement, the rationality of the Belorussian economic model and the irrationality of the western, Putin began what will be a lengthy trek of rebuilding economically, mentally and ideologically. He has rebuffed the west, decried its eternal meddling in Russian affairs, rejected the failed and corrupt liberal modern of development and backed the Palestinian cause in the Middle East. Of course, all of these are works in progress, and Putin alone cannot be expected to either articulate them all perfectly and implement these policies through magic. Making matters worse, he has been hounded at each and every turn by a desperate, broke, insecure and violence-prone US (cf Dugin, 2014).

Putin's main accomplishment was to re-centralize government agencies that had collapsed in the early 1990s. During World War II, the federal government in the USA took over the economy for war production. This is not considered authoritarianism, but a response to an emergency. Abraham Lincoln clamped down on dissent during the American Civil War, and yet, due to the extreme stress of the times, this also is not considered authoritarianism. It was a necessary move begun at a time of chaos and collapse. Russia, however, is not granted this same consideration. *The Moscow Times* wrote in 2012:

President Vladimir Putin remains the country's most popular politician, and an increasing number of Russians approve of his work as head of state, a poll released Thursday showed. Sixty-seven percent of respondents backed Putin's decisions and leadership in July, as opposed to 64 percent in June, pollsters from the independent Levada Center told Interfax. Forty-one percent said they trusted Putin, a 4 percent rise over the previous month.

It is far from clear that Russia is authoritarian. Putin is correcting the course laid by Yeltsin and those financing him. Privatization of Soviet assets in the early 1990s led to the collapse in the Russian economy and a default on its debts in 1997. Authors Bernard Black et al, in 1999, wrote about the privatization of the old Soviet system:

[T]he Russian economy stumbled along through mid-1998, continuing to shrink slowly by official indicators, then collapsed again, as it had in 1991-1992 prior to privatization. Russia's mass privatization "voucher auctions" were moderately honest, but gave control to managers. This permitted insiders (managers and controlling shareholders) to engage in extensive 'self' or 'inside' dealing (transactions by the company, not on arms-length terms, in which the insiders profit directly or indirectly at the company's expense), which the government did nothing to control. Later privatization "auctions" were a massive giveaway of Russia's most important companies at bargain prices to a handful of well-connected "kleptocrats," who continued to behave in the ways that earned them this nickname. Medium-term prospects are grim; the Russian ruble has plunged; the Russian government has defaulted on both its dollar denominated and ruble-denominated debt; most banks are bankrupt; corruption is rampant; tax revenues have collapsed; capital flight is pervasive; and the government (whomever the Prime Minister happens to be at the moment) seems clueless about what to do next (1).

This is why Putin needed centralized the economy starting in 2000. The state had, to a

great extent, ceased to exist. Under Putin's re-centralization of the government, the economy recovered, and became one of the fastest growing economies in the world (ALJ, 2004). The point is that “authoritarianism” is a useless term because too many variables are required for its application. For Russia, it was and is little more than a needed policy correction. As the Russian economy collapsed by 1995, Russians required action. The state, if it was to have any legitimacy at all, was obligated to take action against organized crime, begin collecting taxes again and reform the armed services. Only a fairly strong state could accomplish this.

Russia's GDP grew 800% from 1999 to 2009, whereby she entered the seven biggest economies in the world. She is significantly behind only the US, Japan, China and Germany, and closely catching up with England. Russia's budget has grown by roughly 1400% since 1999. By 2010, Russia had the third largest foreign exchange reserves and became the world's third largest grain exporter, overtaking the United States.

III.

When asked about his political views, his cryptic answer was (in 2000), to paraphrase, a pragmatist with traditional leanings. Putin's policy goals were clear: He had to deal with a) the slow rot of the Soviet system from at least the death of Brezhnev, and b) the total collapse of Russia, her economy and her people engineered by the United States, Harvard University, Gaidar and Chubais. Putin worked with the terrible cards he was dealt.

Putin stated,

Russia is suffering today under the pressure of globalization and its effect on national identity, but also on the catastrophes of the 20th century. We have been forced to survive two assaults on our nation. What resulted was a severe trauma experienced by the cultural ideas of our national life, which ruptured our tradition and continuity. The brutalization of society with its attendant mistrust. Our problems derive from this.¹

This sort of argument is nearly impossible to deny. One of the most unprofessional and obnoxious sins of Russia specialists in the west is their complete refusal to incorporate the inhuman and shocking human cost of the USSR, World War II and the depopulation caused by Harvard's capitalism project into their understanding of Putin's rule. The resultant psychological brutalization is ignored as an ingredient in Russian policy preferences at any level. This cannot be a mere oversight. He continues,

After 1991, the delusion of “development,” as if it were to progress of its own accord, failed as a source of national life. The state, its authority and the intellectual class evaporated. . . The lack of a national idea and a sense of continuity served the interests of the criminal class in the elite who would rather steal the work of others rather than contribute.

Putin's view is a significant one. The nature of the market knows no morals, and certainly knows no cultural identity or stability. None of these essential goods, serving as the necessary basis of any economic system, are economic. They are presupposed in order for

1 Именно это имеет в виду Путин, когда говорит о том, что «сегодня Россия испытывает не только объективное давление глобализации на свою национальную идентичность, но и последствия национальных катастроф XX века, когда мы дважды пережили распад нашей государственности. В результате получили разрушительный удар по культурному и духовному коду нации, столкнулись с разрывом традиций и единства истории, с деморализацией общества, с дефицитом взаимного доверия и ответственности. Именно в этом многие корни острых проблем, с которыми мы сталкиваемся». Quoted from Dugin, 2014

any system to work at all.

Nationalism, in the sense of ethnic and moral solidarity, is an absolute necessity for even a minimum of civic communication. This is because a common language must be grasped by all in its fullness, not merely in its words and syntax. Without civic agreement, debate is impossible, since debate always implies a more fundamental agreement. Nationalism is the ethnic solidarity – the internal ties of a people developing over a long and often painful experience. Methods used in western social science have no way to understand this non-quantifiable and only semi-explicable reality that all social action depends upon.²

To criticize Putin for being “authoritarian” ignores an entire century of death, warfare and tyranny. Comfortable, tenured professors with uncluttered desks have no right to pass judgment on those who have suffered such experiences. All political systems are “authoritarian” in that they are bureaucratic, anonymous and dominated by the capital-state alliance. How the politicians are chosen is neither relevant nor important to how an entrenched and unionized bureaucracy, and corporate capital work out its own agenda. That Putin comes out of the security services meant that he owed the oligarchy (or any other economic faction) nothing. It also meant that those he trusted the most were equally independent of the criminal world and its “political parties.”

Realism in politics means that pompous ideological sloganeering, with guns blazing, is normally not the way to build consensus. Putin's rightist critics might want consider the world Putin faced in 2000. Because their maximal agenda is not immediately imposed on the country (as if Putin is a dictator), he must be part of the New World Order. Even if Putin were a dictator, bureaucratic disorganization and lethargy would make that power anything but effective. No doubt that even that circumstance would lead to hostility against him.

Unfortunately, the Russian right is deeply divided, though its essential views are very popular. On the other hand, a president has no choice except to build any kind of patchwork coalition to ensure a smooth implementation of legislation. Such subtle niceties do not come across effectively during football riots. Muddling through is not a character flaw, but is, for better or worse, built into the very structure of contemporary politics.

Russian royalists might consider how the bureaucracy frustrated Nicholas I to the point where he created his own chancellery so as to avoid the Gogolian clerks altogether. And even this was only marginally successful. Lenin and Stalin were both forced to check the high-flown ideological enthusiast when the day to day business of governing depressed even the most ardent. Power is never something to be desired. Usually, it ends up being more frustrating than liberating. To imagine that one's ideological concepts should be immediately placed into action is the height of political immaturity, but is the mark of the shaken, traumatized victim of 20th century science.

Religiously, Putin wants the spread of the Orthodox gospel to the east. The wisdom of the Chinese, as writers such as Hieromonk Damascene have argued, is extraordinarily suited to apophatic logic. North Korea and China, both enemies of the west, are well suited to receive the Orthodox gospel. Archimandrite Theophanes (Malyavko) has stated that the Russian church will be slowly rebuilt under Putin. Archimandrite Ephraim of Esphigmenou states that “Athos loves Putin” as the re-builder of Orthodox civilization.

His popularity in China is significant. It should be noted that in the war against British arrogance, Petrograd built China as a response to the Rothschild sponsorship of Japanese militarism. It is important to note a fact not reported in English. Namely, that M.

2 While Dugin is often on target, his analysis of American “conservatism” confuses the more recent FOX-news variety with the older conservatism of John Adams, Fischer Ames, or Orestes Brownson. The use of the same word “conservative” is deliberately misleading, since these two ideologies have nothing in common. Dugin rightly defines conservatism as the preservation of the most important national traditions. Yet there is nothing national, traditional or worth preserving in the program of the neo-conservative movement.

Khodorkovsky, the darling of the American establishment, was planning on buying up far eastern energy resources on Russian territory to use against China. By selling them to the US, both he and the neocons in Washington could have a powerful bargaining chip to prevent China from dumping dollars or using the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as an Asian version of NATO. Even more obnoxiously, this same oligarch was also in the process of selling off cutting edge Russian equipment to the US as yet another weapon against Russia and China.

Putin sees Moscow's relation to Peking as similar to Constantinople's relation to Kiev. The Pussy Riot episode, one largely orchestrated by the west, backfired yet again, as most western scams seem to do in Russia. There is no reason to believe Putin was acting from anything but outraged sensibility. He was seen as the defender of the church against the pathological, morbid arrogance and psychoneurotic hatred of the same atheists who depopulated the church generations before. As the west bombed churches in Serbia and financed the rape of Orthodoxy by their pet Muslims in the Balkans, Putin is now the defender of Christianity. It is the capitalists who are the materialists and atheists now, and it is disturbing that this fact has taken so long to penetrate.

IV.

Ivan Il'yin, one of the most penetrating and fearless of Russia's philosophical exiles, speaks of political power in his "What is the State?" (1949):

Those with the desire to have a role in government should be capable of governing themselves. They need to understand the nature and purpose of the state, its goals, its natural development, the popular conception of liberty, social structure, laws, regulations and administration. If this is absent, then the common interest cannot be articulated. Therefore, power will descend into the greed of personal desire while solidarity will lose all meaning. The power of the fist alone will survive. Under such decadent conditions, those who will rule it are the ignorant, the demented, the barbarous, the perverted and the devious. Those who cannot understand the truth of the state have no right to participate in it. The state remains an institution of political education.³

Il'yin, of course, is speaking of the Bolshevik takeover in 1919. The Reds, with little popular support, won the civil war because, among other things, of their authoritarian organization, religious devotion to the vague ideals of Lenin, and a single, simply (however misleading) political program. In times of chaos, victory goes to the most cohesive organization. Numbers do not matter. The rule of the fist is the only weapon the barbarous understand. At a bare minimum, a detailed knowledge of the nation's history is essential. Yet, in the modern west, this is lacking.

3 Желаящий участвовать в управлении государством, должен уметь управлять самим собой, понимать сущность государства, его задачи и цели, органичность народной жизни, значение и смысл свободы, технику социальной организации, законы политики и хозяйства. Нет этого -- и общий интерес останется неосознанным, подмененным частной корыстью и личными вожделениями, принцип солидарности останется пустым словом, общая цель утратится, полномочие будет подменено "кулачным правом"; -- начнется фальсификация государственности и развал. Государство погибнет или сложится вновь по типу диктаториального учреждения. И вот, по отношению ко всем гражданам с незрелым правосознанием (дети, несовершеннолетние, душевнобольные, дикари, политически-бессмысленные, уголовно-преступные, аномальные, жадные плуты и т.п.) -- государство всегда останется опекающим учреждением. Тех, кто неспособен осознать и жизненно оформить свой общественный интерес и кому нелепо давать право голоса, -- государство всегда будет опекать и вести.

Il'yn writes in the same article:

Contemporary cliches such as “all from the leadership” and “all from the grassroots” remain pleasing to people who think passionately and crudely. They are both equally unsafe and impractical. When reform is imposed from above, the creativity of the multitude is destroyed. . . At the same time, the “grassroots” argument disintegrates the state, creates total chaos and negates the rule of law. Quantity is here stressed over quality, and small, powerless communities create a world of turmoil that soon forces all under the heel of the tyrant.

The point is that abstract formulae accomplish little. The Red slogan “peace—land—bread” was as cynical as it was puerile. Mass democracy requires both simplified cliches on the one hand, and an impersonal bureaucracy on the other. The first gives a false sense of understanding, while the second deprives dissidents of an easily identifiable target. One aspect of this argument Il'yn does not mention is that “from the top” and “from the grassroots” are one and the same (and not just in the USSR). Marxism held that “democratic centralism” could be both representative and party-based. So long as politicians are willing to take praise or blame for policies they can not hope to control, such as investment decisions or global currency flows, the “barbarous and perverted” will continue to believe both that they understand policy and empower government.

When Russians talk about democracy, they often are referring to economic security and social welfare. They also see democracy as synonymous with the rigged privatization deals mentioned above. Therefore, authoritarianism is a rational response to the post-Soviet collapse. But since Putin has been consistently popular with the Russian people, his style of government is not only appropriate, but representative. The Russian people do not see Russia as an authoritarian country.⁴

Vasyl Bidolah, unavailable to English readers, has defended Putin in the Russian press. His general argument is that in pursuing Russian national interests, global institutions offer both opportunities and threats. For example, the World Trade Organization is organized to control the internal economic policy of its members. Powerful states like China or Russia can reject this with few repercussions. Bidolah argues that Russian membership in the Organization is a means of removing barriers to Russian energy sales. It is merely instrumental and not an ideological statement. The so-called “European Energy Charter” is a means used by the western bourgeoisie to prohibit Russian energy to be sold in the EU. The WTO renders that void.

Furthermore Russian patriots have failed to consider that WTO membership makes buying up depreciating European assets much easier. Even more, using an international body is also a means of controlling local oligarchs and those who seek to use ill-gotten cash as a means to take power. It offers the president another lever to use against the criminals and warlords continually harassing the system.

IV.

Putin's general view is basically that of a moderate, pragmatic Eurasian. He views Russia as a civilization unique to itself, and needs no tutoring from the west that is disintegrating before his eyes. Russia is the guarantor of Eurasian integrity and for this reason he is a threat to the west whose disappearing empire causes fits of irrationality.

Putin's success has been extraordinary. Even Putin's most dishonest detractors cannot argue with the fact that Russia was on the verge of vanishing in 1998. Further, these same

⁴ Hale, 2009: 9, and this assumes that authoritarianism is a bad thing.

people cannot deny further that emergency measures were justified and necessary for Russia to survive. The conclusion seems perfectly rational – a strong state and the use of Putin's older KGB ties became essential for the survival of Russia.

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