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The limits of fear

As Putin's repressive state tightens its grip, Russians are finding ever subtler ways to resist

In the early 1950s, a group of prominent, mostly Jewish doctors from Moscow was accused of plotting to assassinate Soviet leaders on orders from the West. The accused were fired from their jobs, arrested and tortured. But after Joseph Stalin died in 1953, Lavrenty Beria – one of Stalin's longest-serving secret police chiefs, who oversaw the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) in 1938–45 and spent decades filling the Gulags – called off the investigation. As it turned out, the security services had made the whole thing up.

Today, the Kremlin is following the same playbook. While the 2012 foreign-agent law was initially applied to organisations receiving international funding, its reach has expanded dramatically since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, with the 'foreign agent' label slapped on anyone deemed inconvenient.

This label carries a range of penalties, from a ban on holding public office or performing publicly funded work (such as teaching) to disclaimers on social-media accounts. Last month, the Duma approved measures to strip key citizenship rights – including access to bank accounts and consular services (such as passport renewals) – from Russians living abroad who face prosecution at home over political 'offences', such as failing to comply with foreign-agent legislation. Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin derided those affected as 'degenerates and traitors to the motherland'. His choice of words was telling: not dissidents, but 'degenerates'.

Around the same time, the Ministry of Justice added a new section to its website tracing a long series of supposed anti-state plots, from the 1500s through today, thereby presenting all of Russian history as one long siege by foreign enemies. The 1 200-plus people currently designated as foreign agents are listed, along with a portrait and description of their offences (here is my entry). In doing so, the Kremlin has left no doubt about the message it wants the foreign-agent designation to send.

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The foreign-agent label is just one way Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime silences dissent. More than 5 600 people (probably many more) are currently facing politically motivated prosecutions in Russia, compared with fewer than 5 000 following Stalin's death. (This figure continued falling after Nikita Khrushchev delivered his 'Secret Speech' denouncing Stalin's cult of personality.) Putin's campaign of repression is starting to resemble the Great Terror of 1937.

To be sure, there is a lot about Stalinism that Putin has not quite replicated, beginning with the scale of the Gulag system. But in one respect, Putinism is worse. However distorted Vladimir Lenin's vision of a workers' paradise became under Stalin, it remained fundamental to the Soviet system. Today, there is no ideology, no grand project. There is just one man and his security apparatus working out how to safeguard their own power indefinitely.

The Russian author Vladimir Sorokin saw this coming. In his 2006 novel *Day of the Oprichnik*, Sorokin describes the brazen, violent and debauched behaviour of a state enforcer within a new tsarist-totalitarian Russia of the kind envisioned by nationalists like the political philosopher Aleksandr Dugin. Two decades later – with Putin's security services having dusted off the playbook of the NKVD (not the KGB, which after Stalin's death was mild by comparison) – it reads more like nonfiction than satire.

An older work offers further insight into modern Russia. In Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Heart of a Dog*, written in 1925, the brilliant surgeon Filipp Filippovich Preobrazhensky turns a stray dog into a crude, aggressive proletarian named Sharikov. Russia has since produced plenty of educated, capable professionals like Preobrazhensky. But nowadays, they are increasingly choosing to behave more like Sharikov.

Dmitry Medvedev, who once served as Russia's somewhat liberal president (2008–12), praises the Kremlin and spews vulgar insults against its 'enemies' on social media. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who once displayed unwavering professionalism, now discusses diplomatic relations like mafia deals, using colloquial expressions like '*patsan skazal — patsan sdelal*' ('the guy said, the guy did'). Gulag culture – in which the 'guards' are pitted against the 'guarded', and anyone who challenges the norm is silenced, humiliated and punished – encourages this kind of race to the bottom.

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One should not assume that all of Russian society is submitting to Putinism. For starters, Putin's approval ratings are dropping. While there is a limit to how low these ratings can tumble – the Kremlin-controlled Public Opinion Foundation published a 66 per cent rating early last month, but obediently pushed it back up to 70 per cent the following week – the signal is clear. Even the Levada Center reports that the share of Russians who approve of Putin's activities has declined from 84 per cent to 74 per cent this year.

Moreover, evidence of covert protest is everywhere. A shopkeeper displays balloons in the yellow and blue of the Ukrainian flag, as if part of an unrelated product promotion. A bookstore sells tote bags emblazoned with *1984*, as if it were simply a literary novelty item. A theatre stages anti-Stalinist plays, such as Evgeny Schwartz's *The Dragon*.

True, there is no mass mobilisation against the Ukraine war, even as Ukrainian drones reach targets deep inside Russia, let alone against Putin's regime. But Russians have endured enough tyranny to know what it means to be at the mercy of security forces that will stop at nothing to maintain control. Even subtle resistance to the Kremlin's demand for total surrender is enough to enrage its occupants — and bring intensifying repression.

Ultimately, the only exit from Putinism may well be the same as the exit from Stalinism: the leader's demise. Many Russians hope that, at that point, a Khrushchev-like figure will emerge to denounce the worst of what came before. But Russia might also get a Beria, who was directly responsible for many of the regime's atrocities.

In such a scenario, Russians must ensure that the limits of totalitarian control are undeniable. Only then will the new leader be motivated to dismantle the systems of repression that are now in place, just as Beria, in the brief period between Stalin's death and his own downfall, began dismantling the Gulag system he had spent his career building.

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