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Russia's red thread

Soviet nostalgia, revisionism and anti-Western propaganda: Putin is unwavering in his commitment to the old pillars of Russian politics

After months of hesitation, the US Congress finally sanctioned new military aid for Ukraine. Although this threw Kyiv a lifebelt and boosted morale, predictably Moscow seemed unimpressed. With implicit reference to supposed gains on the battlefield, they rejected a ceasefire, planned peace talks in Switzerland and, indeed, opposed any deviation from the goal of reabsorbing Ukraine completely into the Russian sphere of influence.

But what do Vladimir Putin and those compatriots who backed him in the recent presidential elections really want? And what kind of peace or peace talks are even feasible with Russia? Before tackling the continuities of Russian foreign policy, let's look back at the events of recent weeks.

The Russian presidential elections in March were anything but free and fair. Putin's re-election was never in doubt. In an authoritarian system honing in on totalitarian dictatorship the opposition – such as there is – doesn't stand a chance and the final election results are scarcely credible. But it would be a mistake to characterise them merely as a farce or a sham. Putin got what he wanted, to send a message to domestic and foreign audiences alike that the vast majority of Russian voters support his policies, not least the 'special military operation' in Ukraine. The same applies to his handling of the terrorist attack near Moscow. Notwithstanding Western warnings and overwhelming proof that an Islamic State (ISIS) terrorist cell was responsible, Moscow seized the opportunity to point the finger at Kyiv. Over the past two decades, Putin has systematically consolidated his personal power. He has concentrated control of the mass media in his hands and eliminated his most influential rivals. The life expectancy of 'traitors', real or imagined, and open opponents has shortened dramatically.

A societal consensus

Discussion of Russia's opposition tends to focus on its liberal and democratic segments. But Putin's real internal opposition is very different. It disdains his foreign policy as not aggressive or hardline *enough*. In its view, there is far too much freedom and democracy in Russia for chattering liberals and fifth columnists. It would be a mistake to believe that Putin's power rests solely on such authoritarian instruments as media brainwashing, police repression and political murder. The true logic of Russian authoritarianism lies not so much in repression as in the skilful preservation of a certain societal consensus.

Russians have no wish to return to either the October Revolution of 1917 or the chaotic reforms of the 'wild 1990s'. Both business people and officials close to the regime, who fear confiscation, and the bulk of the population with pro-Putin leanings are agreed on this. Most of contemporary Russian society shares Putin's worldview. Generally speaking, we need to look at three, closely interwoven narratives: Soviet nostalgia, revisionism and anti-Western fearmongering.

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Since the late 1990s, Russian society has been fraught with yearning for what it sees as the glorious Soviet period and 'great Soviet civilisation'. But this is not a yearning for the benefits of developed socialism. Thanks to the oil and gas boom, modern Russians, on average, have never had it so good. The many TV series depicting a sugar-coated Soviet past don't dwell on the endless queuing for sausages or empty shelves. Instead, Russian television portrays the Soviet Union primarily as a globally respected and feared superpower. Harping on about the 'Great Patriotic War' and the victory over fascism is not confined to the Victory Day celebrations. By contrast, the loss of Soviet great-power status – in Putin's words 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century' – engenders almost physical distress among the pro-Putin majority.

Imperialist territorial expansion, deeply rooted in Russian culture since long before the Soviet period, is regarded as an unalloyed good, while territorial losses are considered a national catastrophe. Even after three decades, Russian society is unwilling to accept others' rights to self-determination and the sovereignty claims of post-Soviet states. The

reunification of former Soviet regions under Russia's wing enjoys broad national approval. Furthermore, this revisionism refers not only to the European order since 1991, but to the achievements of *détente* and the international order post 1945.

Anti-Westernism

How should we understand the demand of Putin and his supporters that NATO should rebuff Ukraine and that the borders of the Alliance should be shifted westwards again? Is Putin really afraid of an imminent NATO attack? Does mere proximity constitute a military threat? In that case, why hasn't Russia protested more vociferously against the NATO membership of Finland and Sweden? What Russia is really worried about is that NATO membership for Ukraine and other Eastern European countries makes it impossible to absorb these countries by force and restore its desired 'sphere of influence'.

All this is steeped in a cultural anti-Westernism that goes back to official Tsarist doctrine and the Slavophile–Westerniser controversy in the nineteenth century. The notion of the 'decaying West' infiltrating Russia with its toxic emanations was first expressed as early as 1841 and the narrative has stuck. Russia has defined itself in opposition to the West since long before Putin. Indeed, a cultural and political myth has evolved in which the West embodies virtually all moral evil, in stark contrast to Russia's imagined spirituality, solidarity and purity. This gives Putin's war an existential dimension.

The idea that Putin is cynically exploiting these feelings to consolidate power would be a gross simplification. On the contrary, he sincerely shares them. To ride this wave Putin combines technocratic economic management, authoritarian power and Soviet rhetoric.

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This state of affairs in Russia is hardly unprecedented. Russian opposition commentators compare Putin openly to a similar historical figure, Tsar Nicholas I. Indeed, there are all too many similarities between these historically distant episodes: stifling oppression, exploitation of military victories and ideological confrontation with Europe. Nicholas I's authoritarian regime appeared indestructible until Russia's defeat in the Crimean War in 1853–1856. It collapsed after Tsarist geopolitical ambitions collided with the united European powers.

In the wake of this defeat, political Russia shifted course dramatically, adopting liberal reforms of unprecedented scope and depth. In due course, defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 forced Nicholas II to grant political concessions and even parliamentary government. Much later, in the 1980s, the Afghanistan debacle eased Gorbachev's transition to a new politics, in the form of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. It has become common in Russian historiography to state that these military defeats laid bare the 'rottenness of the regime'. They also awakened a desire for reform, in both the elites and the general public.

What does all this mean for the current state of affairs and the outlook in Ukraine? As important as an openness to signs of peace and a willingness to negotiate might be, the pervasiveness of the three central narratives in Russian foreign policy suggests that the war of conquest and attrition will continue. If Russia cannot be dissuaded from its claims to power and territory in Ukraine, Europe must prepare itself for the long haul. Putin has made no bones about his aims: restoration of Soviet borders and the Soviet sphere of influence on the European continent.



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