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# IS PUTIN AN ISM?

*Richard Sakwa*

University of Kent

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## **Abstract:**

The Putin phenomenon represents a complex and dynamic interaction between the character of the man, his policies and leadership style. After over two decades in office, we can ask whether there is such a thing as ‘Putinism’, and if so, what are its main features? What are the criteria to be considered an ‘ism’? At the minimum, it requires some sort of ‘grand strategy’ that underpins policy in domestic and foreign policy, and which unites the two. A grand strategy is defined as some deep structure in domestic and foreign policy that transcends individual leaders and which has some overarching purpose. Putinism in this paper is considered a ‘passive revolution’, allowing a profound transformation to take place in society while the polity remains relatively static. One of the main criticisms levelled against Putin is that he is brilliant at tactics, above all in factional manoeuvring, but lacks an over-arching vision of where Russia should go. This paper assesses whether Putin is ultimately an ephemeral phenomenon, or whether the era with which his name is associated will endure in history as a distinctive style of rule.

**Keywords:** Putin, leadership, neo-revisionism, post-communism, passive revolution, state populism

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Is there such a thing as Putinism? Can his name be associated with a distinctive political practice and ideology to merit the addition of the ‘ism’ suffix? Or is Putin just another transactional rather than transformational leader?<sup>1</sup> What does it take to become an ‘ism’? Bonapartism has gained a well-deserved place in the pantheon to denote Caeserist political control, while Kemalism is a form of cultural modernisation that has left an enduring legacy in Turkey as a distinctive model of development. Marxism of course is a profound analytical and ideological category reflecting a materialist and class approach to the dynamics of history, while Leninism represents a Party-led movement to seize and maintain power through coercion rather than hegemony. But Putin – does he deserve the suffix? Is there some unifying methodology of power geared towards the achievement of some grand strategic goal? Does Putin’s modest rhetorical style belie a deeper enduring coherence in his project to restore Russia’s place in the world. Despite his longevity in office, is Putin simply part of the long tradition of Russian authoritarian leaders whose top-down methods fail to achieve Russia’s genuine modernisation?<sup>2</sup> Perhaps ultimately the whole Putin phenomenon is little

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<sup>1</sup> The distinction is analysed in George W. Breslauer, *Gorbachev and Yeltsin as Leaders* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> For an informative discussion, see Walter Laqueur, *Putinism: Russia and its Future with the West* (New York, Thomas Dunne & St. Martin’s, 2015), in particular pp. 118-21. On modernisation, see Alena Ledeneva, *Can Russia Modernise? Sistema, Power Networks, and Informal Governance* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013).

more than a Russian version of post-modern populism or nativist illiberalism, with no enduring imprint. Putin undoubtedly has an inimitable style, but that in itself does not add up to an original combination of ideas and practices. Or by contrast, did Putin reshape politics to the degree that he set Russia on a trajectory that will shape the country's future?

Putin inherited from Boris Yeltsin a governance system in which the rules and provisions of the constitutional state were structurally entwined with an administrative regime, standing above (although usually not directly counter) to constitutional stipulations. Putin's skilled and pragmatic leadership drew on the resources of both wings of the dual regime-state to generate stability, but this reproduced in new forms a Soviet-style 'stabilocracy' (*stabilokratiya*).<sup>3</sup> However, while stability in the late Soviet system was to a large extent institutionalised in the form of Communist Party rule, the Putin system is personalised, highly structured yet strangely amorphous. Can this mechanical and manually-managed stability endure without Putin's leadership? The historical situation remains open, and the tension between the two wings of the dual state – the administrative regime and the constitutional state – represents divergent options for Russia's future development. In his absence, will the institutions of the constitutional state come into their own and sustain a more competitive and accountable democracy; or will the incumbent elites rally round to consolidate the authoritarianism of the administrative regime? Can there be a smooth transition to genuine constitutionalism, or will the country once again descend into a war of all against all? To the extent that the historical evolution of Russian governance remains open-ended, we cannot talk of Putinism as a coherent system of rule combining ideology and organisation.

However, the Putin phenomenon is more than a power system using every resource to stay in power, as rational choice approaches suggest. There is an underlying grand strategy, although poorly articulated and applied in a contradictory manner. A grand strategy identifies a nation's core interests, the external forces that pose a threat, and recognises who are the country's friends (and enemies), and how the country's leadership can respond. Putin is often accused of being a master tactician but a poor strategist. There is some truth in this, and certainly Putin avoids any grand statement of his 'certain idea of Russia' (to paraphrase Charles de Gaulle's 'All my life, I have had a certain idea of France'); but Putin has never been reticent about talking about the problems and challenges facing Russia. This begins with his *Russia at the Turn of the Millennium* statement issued in the last days of 1999 (colloquially known as his *Millennium Manifesto*) to his annual address (*poslanie*) to the Federal Assembly, which reflect not only his immediate concerns but also trace the evolution of his thinking.<sup>4</sup> Putin has been consistent and unequivocal in stating that foreign policy should serve domestic development, but from the Russian perspective (and this is the consensus view of the Russian elite at least since Evgeny Primakov), the failure to devise an adequate post-Cold War peace order forced Russia into a more assertive foreign policy stance. Russian domestic development is inextricably entwined with foreign policy issues, although neither can be simply reduced to the other, but it is out of this dynamic interplay that the Putin phenomenon has been shaped.

## The four Putins

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Sakwa, *The Putin Paradox* (London, I. B. Tauris, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Putin, 'Russia at the Turn of the Millennium', in Vladimir Putin, *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia's President Vladimir Putin*, with Nataliya Gevorkyan, Natalya Timakova, and Andrei Kolesnikov, translated by Catherine A. Fitzpatrick (London, Hutchinson, 2000), pp. 209-219.

Putin's world view has evolved over the years in response to changing domestic circumstances and developments in foreign affairs, but the high degree of continuity is striking. Putin's leadership is a broad and contradictory phenomenon, and thus it is easy to highlight one aspect to the detriment of seeing the larger picture. A common approach is to identify the many facets of Putin's character, but without some sort of synthesis we are left with only a fragmented and incoherent picture, in which arbitrary conclusions can be drawn to suit one's political preferences.<sup>5</sup> Only by examining the dynamic evolution of the polity and policy can a coherent analysis be drawn. The four Putins discussed in this section correspond and overlap with the four phases of post-communist Russian foreign policy: the liberal Westernism of the early years (1990-95); the sovereign internationalism and multipolarity of Primakov's competitive co-existence (1996-99); Putin's new realism from 2000 to 2012 (pursued by Dmitry Medvedev between 2008 and 2011); and the neo-revisionist era from 2012, which continues to this day.<sup>6</sup> These phases are both chronological, tracing the growing alienation between Russia and the West, and synchronous, with elements of each era overlapping with the others.

Four different elements of Putin's thinking were already evident in the *Millennium Manifesto*: Putin as a liberal Westerniser; Putin as a sovereign internationalist; Putin as a neo-revisionist; and Putin as a cultural conservative. There is a remarkable continuity in Putin's thinking, and thus all four elements have coexisted, but at various times different facets have become more salient – and this is where the evolution of his practical responses to international politics becomes apparent. The corollary is that a different set of Western leadership policies may have fostered the benign aspects (the opportunity was there), while negating the more assertive aspects. It was not some traditionalist appeal to Westphalian sovereignty that pressured Russia to exit the post-1991 consensus but the particular practices of the power system in which it came to be embedded.

Putin was a benign Westerniser when he delivered his landmark speech (in fluent German) to the Bundestag in Berlin on 25 September 2001. Taking place just weeks after the Al-Qaeda attack on New York and Washington on 11 September (9/11), Putin the day before (against stiff opposition from hardliners) had agreed to US bases in Central Asia, intelligence sharing and other forms of cooperation to help the struggle against terrorism, including support for the invasion of Afghanistan. Putin noted that this was the first opportunity for a Russian leader to address the German parliament in the entire history of Russo-German relations, and went on to argue:

It was the political choice of the people of Russia that enabled the then leaders of the USSR to take decisions that eventually led to the razing of the Berlin Wall. It was that choice that infinitely broadened the boundaries of European humanism and that enables us to say that no one will ever be able to return Russia back into the past. As for European integration, we not just support these processes, but we are looking to them with hope. ... No one calls in question the great value of Europe's relations with the United States. I am just of the opinion that Europe will reinforce its reputation of a strong and truly independent centre of world politics soundly and for a long time if it succeeds in bringing together its own potential and

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<sup>5</sup> Exemplified by Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, new and expanded edition (Washington, DC, Brookings Institution Press, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> The phases are described in detail in Richard Sakwa, *Russian Politics and Society*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition (London and New York, Routledge, 2021), Chapter 18.

that of Russia, including its human, territorial and natural resources and its economic, cultural and defence potential.<sup>7</sup>

This was an appeal for a greater Europe in which Russia would be a constitutive member, but Putin failed to reckon with the power of Atlantic solidarity. Even in this most idealistic of speeches, critics discerned an attempt to drive a wedge between Europe and the US. In fact, Putin was drawing on the Gaullist-Mitterrandist tradition, very popular in Russia, of a ‘Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals’, based on an ideology of ‘Europeanism’ (which is not quite the same as the idea of European integration), in which Europe would act as a separate pole in world affairs, allied but not subordinate to the US. In the post-Cold War era, contrary to Russian expectations, rather than strengthening, this strand became involuted (under-developed).<sup>8</sup> Instead, Atlanticism became the predominant ideological force, within whose framework the Cold War bacillus was harboured.

The West’s various wars in Iraq and elsewhere provoked the severe condemnatory temper of Putin’s Munich speech on 10 February 2007, which prefigured the neo-revisionist turn in 2012. In other words, although the tone was harsh in Munich, the fundamental appeal was for the West to take into consideration what were considered Russia’s essential national interests, and if this was done then Russia would be back on track to join the liberal international order. The tone could hardly have been more different from his earlier speech at the Bundestag, but there was a high degree of continuity in substance. Putin stressed the ‘universal, indivisible character of security’ and warned against the dangers of establishing a ‘unipolar world ... in which there is one master, one sovereign. And at the end of the day this is pernicious not only for all those within this system, but also for the sovereign itself because it destroys itself from within’. Putin noted ‘those who teach us [about democracy] do not want to learn themselves’. He condemned the ‘almost uncontained hyper use of force – military force – in international relations, force that is plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflict’. He warned that ‘We are seeing a greater and greater disdain for the basic principles of international law’. He ended by stressing that Russia ‘with a thousand years of history’ did not need to be instructed on how to behave in international affairs.<sup>9</sup> By now it was clear that Putin was disillusioned with the West, emphasizing the negative political and regional effects of the unmediated enlargement agenda, that threatened to blow-back on to the West itself not just by provoking geopolitical pushback but by eroding the principles on which the West was itself founded. Once again, commentary focused on the divisive aspects of the speech, with the American secretary of defence Robert Gates noting that Putin ‘was clearly trying to drive a wedge between the Europeans and the United States with his anti-American remarks’.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Putin was condemning irresponsible Atlanticism rather than American power as such.

It was only after the Libyan debacle of 2011 that the neo-revisionist strain in Putin’s thinking prevailed, and became the guiding principle of his renewed presidency. Domestically, Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012 was accompanied by a ‘cultural turn’, in which conservative themes became more salient and the concerns of the neo-traditionalist

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<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Putin, ‘Speech in the Bundestag of the Federal Republic of Germany’, 25 September 2001, [http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2001/09/25/0001\\_type82912type82914\\_138535.shtml](http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2001/09/25/0001_type82912type82914_138535.shtml).

<sup>8</sup> Richard Sakwa, ‘One Europe or None? Monism, Involution and Relations with Russia’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 70, No. 10, December 2018, pp. 1656-67.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Russian President Vladimir Putin’s Speech at the 2007 Munich Conference on Security Policy’, 10 February 2007; <http://president.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2007/02/118109.shtml>.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (London, W. H. Allen, 2014), p. 155.

bloc, including its Orthodox wing, were given greater prominence.<sup>11</sup> Putin has always been something of a traditionalist, and this was given expression in his *Millennium Manifesto* in 1999 and in his core assertion in many later speeches about Russia's uniqueness founded on national values, giving rise to the fundamental postulate of his leadership that Russia had to shape its own path to modernity. This is very different from the Soviet attempt to create an alternative modernity, which he argued was a future that had failed.<sup>12</sup> Russian foreign policy was now conducted within the framework of the neo-revisionist paradigm, focused not on changing the structure of international politics but on modifying its practices so that the concerns of rising powers were better reflected in what Moscow insisted had become a multi-polar (or in Russian terminology, polycentric) system. In domestic matters the cultural turn represented the re-assertion of the autonomy of tradition. Traditionalism became an idiom but not the ideology of Putinite rule.

The political consequences were clear: Russia was intent on becoming modern, but it would do so in its own way, and would resist not only Western political hegemony, but also its cultural expression through democracy promotion and liberal values. Russia did not repudiate the fundamental values expressed, for example, in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but it did insist that their particular expression in the mores of, say, East coast American social liberals, could not be imposed as universal values on Russian society. This is one reason why the antagonism between Putin and Hillary Clinton ran so deep. It entailed not only a political rejection but also a profound cultural contradiction between two models of social development, overlain with the classic rejection by the subaltern of the value imperialism of dominant powers.<sup>13</sup> In this case, Russia refused to accept that it was a subaltern, a country that is shaped by the preferences of an external value system.<sup>14</sup> Russia's view of modernity is that it is a universal and not the property of any contingently dominant power system. This is the counterpart of its understanding of the international system comprising two levels, in which the institutions of international society (such as the UN) and its processes (such as diplomacy) are considered the embodiment of order; while at the second level, the terrain of state interactions and order formation, no particularistic system (however much it may claim to represent universal principles, such as the US-led liberal international order), could be recognised as hegemonic and universal.

The neo-revisionist turn was accompanied by a new emphasis on conservative values and traditional principles. This was reflected in the more conservative Putin, who outlined his views at the meeting of the Valdai Club on 19 September 2013. Putin presented Russia as the keeper of a Western tradition that he argued the West itself had lost. The speech outlined an ideology of conservative traditionalism, but the cautious and pragmatic Putin remained. This was not a manifesto of reactionary xenophobia but it was one that drew on neo-traditionalist arguments for cultural continuity and its critique of social liberalism. Indeed, he stressed ideological pluralism and mutual toleration. He noted

For us (and I am talking about Russians and Russia), questions about who we are and who we want to be are increasingly prominent in our society. We have left behind Soviet ideology, and there will be no return. Proponents of fundamental conservatism

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Sakwa, 'Can Putinism Solve its Contradictions', openDemocracy, 27 December 2013, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/richard-sakwa/can-putinism-solve-its-contradictions>.

<sup>12</sup> As argued by Johann P. Arnason, *The Future that Failed: Origins and Destinies of the Soviet Model* (London, Routledge, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Ayşe Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Pace Viatcheslav Morozov, *Russia's Postcolonial Identity: a Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

who idealise pre-1917 Russia seem to be similarly far from reality, as are supporters of an extreme-western-style liberalism.

Having stated the problem of political identity, he outlined the international pressures, stressing that ‘the world is becoming more rigid, and sometimes forgoes not merely international law [a theme raised in Munich], but also basic decency’. He reprised some of the themes in the *Millennium Manifesto*, and drawing on his proclivities as a historian, he outlined the context (and it is worth quoting at length, since it reflects a profound strand in Putin’s thinking):

Meanwhile, today Russia’s national identity is experiencing not only objective pressures stemming from globalisation, but also the consequences of the national catastrophes of the twentieth century, when we experienced the collapse of our state two different times. The result was a devastating blow to our nation’s cultural and spiritual codes; we were faced with the disruption of traditions and the consonance of history, with the demoralisation of society, with a deficit of trust and responsibility. These are the root causes of many pressing problems we face. ... Practice has shown that a new national idea does not simply appear, nor does it develop according to market rules. A spontaneously constructed state and society does not work, and neither does mechanically copying other countries’ experiences. Such primitive borrowing and attempts to civilize Russia from abroad were not accepted by an absolute majority of our people. This is because the desire for independence and sovereignty in spiritual, ideological and foreign policy spheres is an integral part of our national character. .... The time when ready-made lifestyle models could be installed in foreign states like computer programmes has passed. We also understand that identity and a national idea cannot be imposed from above, cannot be established on an ideological monopoly.

The lessons he drew are stark. Instead of ideational ghettos, he called for a national rallying based on diversity and ‘pluriculturalism’:

All of us – so-called Neo-Slavophiles and Neo-Westernisers, statist and so-called liberals – all of society must work together to create common development goals. We need to break the habit of only listening to like-minded people, angrily – and even with hatred – rejecting any other point of view from the outset. ... This means that liberals have to learn to talk with representatives of the left-wing and, conversely, that nationalists must remember that Russia was formed specifically as a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional country from its very inception. Nationalists must remember that by calling into question our multi-ethnic character, and exploiting the issue of Russian, Tatar, Caucasian, Siberian or any other nationalism or separatism, means that we are starting to destroy our genetic code. In effect, we will begin to destroy ourselves.

In a multicultural society incoming groups maintain their own identities although within the framework of a dominant culture, whereas in a pluricultural society such as Russia’s the nation is recognised as being comprised of many autochthonous peoples – all native to the land. The Tatars, for example, can reasonably claim to have been in Russia as long as (if not longer) than the Slavs. In such a volatile context, the claim by any one nation to be pre-eminent, Putin justifiably argued, would be liable to tear the country apart. He had skirted close to that proposition in his pre-election article on the national question in January

2012 when he appealed to the Russian nationalist vote by promising to regulate labour migration and by arguing that Russia is a 'unique civilisation' in which the nation-state model did not apply. Although he reaffirmed Russia's multiethnic character, he argued that Russians were a 'state-forming people', whose 'great mission' was to 'unite and bind' the great civilisation. He recognised that the country was made up of many different peoples, but argued that 'we are one people', the creators of a distinctive 'state-civilisation' ('*gosudurstvo-tsvilizatsiya*') in which 'there are no national minorities' and all citizens are united by a 'common culture and common values'.<sup>15</sup> The idea that Russians were the 'state-forming' nation encountered a hostile reaction from the other peoples and was not formally adopted in state nationality policy.

Putin then outlined his understanding of 'patriotism', the concept that in his renewed presidency he repeatedly suggested was the fundamental value of the new society:

Russia's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity are unconditional. These are red lines no one is allowed to cross. For all the differences in our views, debates about identity and about our national future are impossible unless their participants are patriotic. Of course I mean patriotism in the purest sense of the word.

The next section has been much quoted out of context, in which he condemned what he considered to be the rampant social liberalism of the West:

What else but the loss of the ability to self-reproduce could act as the greatest testimony of the moral crisis facing a human society? Today almost all developed nations are no longer able to reproduce themselves, even with the help of migration. Without the values embedded in Christianity and other world religions, without the standards of morality that have taken shape over millennia, people will inevitably lose their human dignity. We consider it natural and right to defend these values. One must respect every minority's right to be different, but the rights of the majority must not be put into question.

These comments were connected with the character of the post-communist world order:

At the same time we see attempts to somehow revive a standardised model of a unipolar world and to blur the institutions of international law and national sovereignty. Such a unipolar, standardised world does not require sovereign states; it requires vassals. In a historical sense this amounts to a rejection of one's own identity, of the God-given diversity of the world.

There was much more in this vein, stressing Russia's rich cultural and ethnic diversity, he ended by arguing that Russia 'is returning to itself, to its own history'.<sup>16</sup> This was a complex speech with many layers of meaning, and that is why I drawn from it at such length. It represented an evolution in Putin's thinking, but at the same time remained remarkably true to his early formulations in 1999 as he prepared to take on the mantle of leadership. The many Putins in fact represent different facets of the one Putin.

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<sup>15</sup> Vladimir Putin, 'Rossiya: natsional'nyi vopros', *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 23 January 2012, [http://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1\\_national.html](http://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1_national.html).

<sup>16</sup> Vladimir Putin, 'Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club', 19 September 2013; <http://eng.news.kremlin.ru/news/6007>.



Contrary to such analysts as Michel Eltchaninoff, this does not mean that Putin has become a reactionary anti-Western conservative, or that he defends a ‘Russian path’ (reprising the *sonderweg* thinking of Second Empire German national liberals) that repudiates the achievements of liberal modernity; or, above all, that he now adopted a ‘revanchist programme’. Eltchaninoff is right to argue that ‘The politics of harmony was clearly an ideological act’, but wrong in his assertion that ‘it resulted in restraining any freely critical assessment of the USSR. The rampant return of Stalinism in the country today is proof of this’.<sup>17</sup> Conservative themes did shape Putin’s presidency from 2012, but the essence of Putinism is to keep all options open, and it would be a profound mistake to say that some sort of revanchist conservatism became dominant. This is problematic in a country in which there is no hegemonic social class, elite group or ideological project. The conservative ideas outlined in Putin’s Valdai speech were balanced by the maintenance of more liberal positions in economic policy, and even in the social sphere. For example, Putin stood up against those who wished to introduce more restrictive abortion laws.<sup>18</sup> Equally, there has been no official rehabilitation of Stalin, and the historical debate remains open, as did the variety of history textbooks on offer in schools.

Opening the ‘Wall of Sorrow’ monument to those imprisoned and executed in the 1930s on 30 October 2017, Putin spoke eloquently about Stalin’s crimes:

It is very important that we all and future generations – this is of great significance – know about, and remember this tragic period in our history when entire social groups and entire peoples were cruelly persecuted, including workers, peasants, engineers, military commanders, clergy, government employees, scientists and cultural figures. Neither talent, nor services to the Motherland, nor sincere devotion to it could help avoid repression, because unwarranted and absolutely absurd charges could be brought against anyone. Millions of people were declared ‘enemies of the people’, shot or mutilated, or suffered in prisons, labour camps or exile.<sup>19</sup>

In keeping with his view outlined earlier in his *Millennium Manifesto*, Putin argued ‘This terrible past cannot be erased from the national memory. And certainly cannot be justified by whatever imaginary greater good of the people’. This does not sound like someone intent on rehabilitating Stalin.<sup>20</sup>

In terms of governance, by keeping the two wings of the constitutional state in permanent tension, Putin perpetuated the emergency quality of rule that his promise to restore the state was intended to overcome – yet another of the paradoxes of Putinism. A leader who tried to normalise the situation in Russia did so by abnormal means. Awareness of the dilemma as he neared the end of his constitutionally-mandated term in office prompted constitutional reform. Announcing his proposed amendments in his *poslanie* on 15 January 2020, Putin argued ‘Russian society is becoming more mature, responsible and demanding.

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<sup>17</sup> Michel Eltchaninoff, ‘What is Putinism?’, HuffPost, nd, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/michel-eltchaninoff/-what-is-putinism\\_b\\_8624088.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/michel-eltchaninoff/-what-is-putinism_b_8624088.html). For a more extensive exposition, see Michel Eltchaninoff, *Inside the Mind of Vladimir Putin* (London, Hurst, 2018). Despite the profound superficiality of Eltchaninoff’s understanding of Putinism, it has been very influential in countries such as France, and helped shape the narrative that Putin was out to ‘subvert’ the West.

<sup>18</sup> For example, ‘Vladimir Putin’s Annual News Conference’, 14 December 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56378>.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Opening of Wall of Sorrow Memorial to Victims of Political Repression’, 30 October 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55948>.

<sup>20</sup> For an intelligent analysis, see Shaun Walker, *The Long Hangover: Putin’s New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2018).

Despite the differences in the ways to address their tasks, the main political forces speak from the position of patriotism and reflect the interests of their followers and voters'.<sup>21</sup> On this basis, he proposed granted the State Duma the right to appoint the prime minister and their cabinet. The goal was to allow him to retire from direct governance while protecting his legacy and to lock in the system that he had created. In other words, the goal was to create a durably successful soft authoritarian system by institutionalising Putinism.

## Patterns of Putinism

This does not mean that a penumbra of restrictions and suffocating impositions did not dampen spirits during Putin's leadership. The West's reaction to the neo-revisionist turn undoubtedly took Putin and the Russian elite by surprise. The boycott by most Western leaders of the Sochi winter Olympics in February 2014 predated the Ukraine crisis, and contributed to the intensity of the crisis when it came. In structural terms, when the enlargement of the West encountered an obstacle, it built up a well of resentment accompanied by the ideological denunciation of the opponent. Putin in particular has been demonised. Matt Taibbi calls this 'Putin derangement syndrome', the exaggerated and fact-free assertion of supernatural and typically demonic powers to the man.<sup>22</sup> Putin emerged as some sort of universal demi-urge in the 2016 US presidential election, and in the following period Russia was the stick deployed to constrain Trump's putative challenge to Cold War Atlanticism. The Russiagate scandal inspired political fantasies and conspiracy theories played out against Russia's 'hacking' of American democracy. Liberal globalists and neoconservatives united in their condemnation, and only orthodox conservatives (like Patrick Buchanan) and elements of the traditional left challenged the consensus.

In Russian parlance the broader phenomenon is identified as 'Russophobia', something with deep roots in Western culture and politics.<sup>23</sup> The alleged 'Russophobes' respond by condemning the term, and they are right to note that the usage is sometimes used to blunt legitimate discussion of Kremlin policies. However, the argument that the condemnation is of Putin and not of Russia more broadly is not convincing. While valid, the distinction is artificial. It assumes that Putin remains in power through manipulation and coercion, and that he is intent on subverting the West.<sup>24</sup> While these instruments are certainly used, and Putin's criticism of Western policy became a cultural critique of the West itself, to suggest that this is how the regime perpetuates itself (the 'diversionary' argument favoured by radical liberals at home and abroad) misses much of importance about how the Russian political system works. Putin locates himself at the centre of all the four great ideological-interest constituencies that make up Russia today: the liberals (of various stripes), the conservative-guardians (the *siloviki-okhraniteli*), the neo-traditionalists and the Eurasianists. This is a political reality that any Russian leader would ignore at their peril.

Putin is not a counter-revolutionary, and thus lacks the zeal of the radical liberals in dismantling the Soviet system and its legacies, but this does not mean that Putin is not critical

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<sup>21</sup> Vladimir Putin, 'Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly', 15 January 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62582>.

<sup>22</sup> Matt Taibbi, 'Putin Derangement Syndrome Arrives', *Rolling Stone*, 3 April 2017, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/putin-derangement-syndrome-arrives-114557/>.

<sup>23</sup> Dominic Basulto, *Russophobia: How Western Media Turn Russia into an Enemy* (No location, The Druzhba Project, 2015); Guy Mettan, *Creating Russophobia: From the Great Religious Schism to Anti-Putin Hysteria* (Atlanta, GA, Clarity Press, 2017); Andrei Tsygankov, *Russophobia: Anti-Russian Lobby and American Foreign Policy* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> Arkady Ostrovsky, *The Invention of Russia: The Rise of Putin and the Age of Fake News* (London, Penguin Books, 2017).

of the Communist regime. This anti-revolutionary stance in domestic politics has its analogue in international affairs, where Putin is not anti-Western but post-Western. Putin and much of the ruling elite remain committed to the original early post-Cold War vision of the greater West. The problem arises out of the failure of the historical West to find an adequate response to the emergence of an independent Russia intent on asserting its autonomous policies in global affairs. Unused to opposition in the post-Cold War period as the ‘unipolar’ model radicalised, the Atlantic system lacked the diplomatic or conceptual instruments with which to respond and instead once again drew on the Cold War armoury of sanctions and militarisation.

At the same time, there is no shortage of hawks in Russia who took advantage of renewed confrontation with the West to revive Cold War Soviet practices. For example, a number of universities have re-established the ‘first department’ in their personnel offices; in other words, a permanent representative of the security services. All manner of petty and not so petty restrictions have been imposed, including limits on access to foreign materials and on travel. At a time when official policy favoured greater internationalisation of Russian higher education and science (one of the essential criteria to be able to push up the international league tables), the regional FSB offices were intent on re-establishing Soviet insularity and spy-mania. This did not mean that the *silovik* bloc had won and eclipsed the others, or that Putin had unequivocally thrown in his lot with them. Putin remains the balancer, and this is why he hoped that a ‘reset’ with the incoming Trump administration in 2017 would provide an opportunity to restore equilibrium in international affairs as well as in domestic politics. This option was derailed by the ‘Russiagate’ allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election.

The classic Putin path of compromise steers a path between coercion and hegemony. He was clearly attracted to Russia’s tradition of authoritarian modernisation, an oxymoron whose implications became increasingly apparent. The first in this role was Peter the Great, who sought to drag Russia into European modernity, but thereby opened up a gulf between state and society that neo-traditionalists argue has not been healed to this day. Gordon Hahn calls this a ‘displacement’ process, ‘the re-orientation of Russian self identity in persistent reference to another cultural identity - European’. This gave rise then and today to the ‘curious contradiction in which Russia is simultaneously both Westernising and at war with a Western power’.<sup>25</sup> Alexander III is also clearly someone who Putin admires, judging by the number of statues to him that Putin has inaugurated. Following the assassination of Alexander II by revolutionaries in 1881, Alexander III’s strong leadership applied a mix of repression and state-sponsored development. Putin has also referred to Pyotr Stolypin, the authoritarian reformer after the 1905 revolution to his assassination in 1911. The only leading Soviet figure whom Putin has honoured is Marshal Georgy Zhukov, who led Soviet forces to victory over Nazi Germany in May 1945. His giant statue on horseback was inaugurated in 1995, outside the State History Museum by the Kremlin walls. As for Yeltsin, the symbol of the aspirations for Russia to join the West, Putin has been ambivalent. His loyalty to Yeltsin and his entourage propelled Putin to the presidency, but once in power Putin has picked apart the Yeltsin legacy.

Putin is a classic managerialist, ruling in a technocratic manner that obviates open political debate over policy, although when it comes to long-term strategic planning the

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<sup>25</sup> Gordon M. Hahn, ‘The Image of Peter the Great in Russian Culture’, *Russian and Eurasian Politics*, 11 November 2019, <https://gordonhahn.com/2019/11/11/the-image-of-peter-the-great-in-russian-culture-parts-1-and-2-complete/>.

various factions have forcefully advanced their views.<sup>26</sup> There is a deeper problem here. American paleoconservatives argue that instead of generating liberal democracy, developmental managerialism only facilitates ‘the modernization of traditional political structures into various new hybrid types of authoritarian managerial regimes with few organic ties to the communities over which they rule’. Such authoritarian systems derive less from problems of ‘underdevelopment’, but from ‘Western technological, economic and managerial modernization’.<sup>27</sup> Paradoxically, modernisation itself becomes a way of perpetuating authoritarian rule. From this perspective, Putinism is only the latest manifestation of the Soviet and even pre-Soviet drive for top-down modernisation, inhibiting the development of a free economy and society. The problem cannot be resolved simply by joining the capitalist core states, as advocated for example by the long-time leader of the social liberal Yabloko party, Grigory Yavlinsky, since if this analysis holds true, it is precisely from the centres of global managerialism that the problem emanates in the first place.<sup>28</sup> For others, it is the absence of a ‘national developmental strategy’ that was responsible for Russia’s failure to achieve Chinese-style growth, one that avoided top-down decrees but which freed the entrepreneurial energies of society.<sup>29</sup> At the heart of Putinism is belief in the efficacy of state action (as outlined in his doctoral thesis in June 1997).<sup>30</sup> Paleoconservative appeals to ‘dismantle the administrative state’ in Russia will fall on stony ground.

## Reform and restoration

Russia remains the graveyard of utopias, including the liberal one. This helps explain why Putin is the arch-pragmatist. This is not the same as cynicism. While Putin is sceptical about grand programmes of reform, and deeply opposed to revolution as a mode of social change, he is in no way a post-modern relativist. He operates according to a stable set of values – and one of them is that Russia must be treated as an equal by the international community. In dealing with the rest of the world (notably China) this is achieved, but only in relations with the historical West has this proved problematic. Another feature is Putin’s belief in his tutelary role and driver of a pragmatic programme of modernisation from above. In his classic work, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Samuel Huntington argued that modernising societies were in danger of being overwhelmed by societal demands and social pressures if authoritarian restraints were released too fast. Hence there was a need for imposed constraints to allow adequate structures and institutions to take shape and for the polity to form in a manner capable of aggregating and controlling these pressures.<sup>31</sup> These important considerations were lost in the rush towards instant democratisation in the post-communist era, but were revived by Putin in his shift from reform to restoration and stability.

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<sup>26</sup> Andrew Monaghan, *Power in Modern Russia: Strategy and Mobilisation* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017).

<sup>27</sup> Jean-François Drolet and Michael C. Williams, ‘America First: Paleoconservatism and the Ideological Struggle for the American Right’, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, online version, 9 December 2019, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> Grigory Yavlinsky, *The Putin System: An Opposing View* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2019).

<sup>29</sup> Aleksei Kiva, ‘Bol’she chem prestuplenie: o strategicheskikh oshkakh postsovetsoi Rossii’, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 21 February 2019, p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> See Harley Balzer, ‘The Putin Thesis and Russian Energy Policy’, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 21, No. 3, 2005, pp. 210-225, and Harley Balzer, ‘Vladimir Putin’s Academic Writings and Russian Natural Resource Policy’, *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 53, No. 1, January-February 2006, pp. 48-54.

<sup>31</sup> Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1968).

The four Putins we identified earlier are facets of a single larger post-communist Russian political project. In the 1990s the focus was on ‘reform’, but from 2000 the emphasis shifted to ‘restoration’ and stability. This entailed the re-establishment of the authority of the state, the reinforcement and regularisation of the power of the regime, taking advantage of the breathing space in foreign affairs to allow society to stabilise and develop, and above all for the country to be re-industrialised. Putin, like his Soviet forebears, retains a commitment to manufacturing that is rather traditional, although it is a concern shared by some continental states, notably Germany, whereas others have emphasised the service sector. Reconstitution, as with everything to do with Putin, is ambivalent, in that it suggests that the priority will be given to the development of constitutional order. In part this was the case, with important judicial reforms early in his leadership and there was significant investment in the court infrastructure that greatly increased trust in and demand for law.<sup>32</sup> However, this was also accompanied by the re-assertion of regime practices, including the ‘manual management’ of political processes and in general the consolidation of a power system outside of the formal constitutional constraints.

Restoration also applies to foreign policy, where Putin sought both to insert Russia into the liberal international order, but at the same time to assert Russia’s independence as a great power. In the end these two goals proved incompatible, not because it is theoretically impossible but because of the hegemonic character of the US-led system. There could only be one dominant power, as France under de Gaulle had discovered earlier. Nevertheless, in the period of ‘new realism’ between 2000 and 2012, Putin tried to find some way to engage with the historic West as an equal, and only when that failed (including trying the liberal face of Putinism through the Medvedev variant), did Putin shift to a strategy of neo-revisionist post-Westernism. This did not mean repudiating economic or cultural ties with the West (that would be anti-Westernism), but represented an evolution in his self-understanding (drawing on the thinking of three non-liberal blocs in Russia (the *siloviki-okhraniteli*, the neo-traditionalists and the Eurasianists), that in conditions of the expansive and homogenising universalism of the historic West, Russia had to find a distinctive path. This was accompanied by a ‘cultural turn’ in domestic politics, emphasising family values and elements of a new conservatism, accompanied by a more critical evaluation of the shortcomings of the West’s socio-economic model and its social liberalism. Russia and China aligned in condemnation of America’s hegemonic aspirations, and began to devise the contours of an alternative world order. This new model did not repudiate the rules of international society as they have evolved since 1945, but opposed the claim of the liberal world order to be synonymous with order itself. This neo-revisionist policy was accompanied by attempts to institutionalise the alternative in deeper Eurasian integration, which ultimately provoked the conflict in Ukraine, as well as various organisations embodying the anti-hegemonic alignment, notably the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the BRICS alignment.

Two models of post-Cold War world order clashed. Putin and his predecessors sought a transformation in which Russia (and China and other states) became part of a pluralistic world system subordinate only to the institutions of international society. Instead, the historical West (in Russia’s view) was engaged in a relentless drive for enlargement that effectively sought to bring the whole world into its purview. Not surprisingly from this universal perspective, the West opposed ‘spheres of influence’ and other attributes of what were dismissed as nineteenth century great power politics. If the whole world was its ‘sphere of influence’, no other partial sphere could be allowed. Not surprisingly, returning powers such as Russia and China chafed not only at the neo-containment policy imposed by the West

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<sup>32</sup> Kathryn Hendley, *Everyday Law in Russia* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2017).

to constrain their ambition to break-out from what was seen as a set of artificial constraints designed to maintain Western pre-eminence, but also at the deeper ideological framework in which the policy was embedded. The ‘rules’ advanced by the West were considered to be the preferences of a particular power system although proclaimed as universal, whereas Russia was no less committed to a set of rules, but different ones. For sovereign internationalists (like Russia and China), the rules should be derived from the institutions of global governance at the level of international society (notably the UN), which were the only truly universal source of global legitimacy.

Although described as the benign ‘rules-based liberal international order’, Moscow and Beijing also understood that this was also a power system, and never forgot that the term is usually prefixed by ‘US-led’. In the early years Moscow believed that some sort of European settlement could be achieved in which the EU and Russia would converge and become ‘strategic partners’, but in the end this also became a chimera. Such an outcome was both inevitable and avoidable. Realists argue that the anarchic structure of the international system and great power conflict will inevitably lead a rising state to challenge the dominant power, while the incumbent regional hegemon will do all that it can to thwart the ambitions of the rising power.<sup>33</sup> This may well be the case, but after 1991 the Russian leadership pushed for the creation of a cooperative regional order in Europe and some sort of condominium with the US where Russia would become part of a cooperative although multipolar world system. The idea was to turn the ‘smaller’ Europe of the EU into part of a broader common European home (as described by Mikhail Gorbachev), or ‘greater Europe’ in Putin’s lexicon. At the same time, the historic West would become a greater West. This would have provided a benign framework for Russia to resolve its profound governance and other problems while avoiding the drawing of new lines across Europe. No such transformation of European international politics was on offer after 1989.<sup>34</sup> Instead, the dynamic of enlargement generated mistrust and the accentuation of the neo-revisionist and culturally conservative facets of Putinism.

### **Putin’s passive revolution and state populism**

We are now in a position to assess more broadly whether there is such a thing as Putinism.<sup>35</sup> It certainly exists in the limited sense that it is a distinctive response to specific problems of Russian development and governance. It represents a certain style of governance and type of statecraft, but has much in common with the one devised by Yeltsin, but more effective. This model of regime-society relations delivers certain public goods, but it is profligate and stunts talent and the entrepreneurial spirit, although does not stifle them entirely. Above all, the passivity induced by the system of managed democracy inhibits the expression of the transformation of the consumer and bourgeois into a *citoyen*, someone aware of their political and social rights in a constitutional state and ready to defend them, although it provides the framework for such a transformation. This does not mean that those who agree to work with the system are somehow turned into ‘appeasers’, contrasted to a small group of brave ‘dissidents’. Putin’s historic bloc is a more complex and dynamic phenomenon than any late

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<sup>33</sup> John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated edition (New York, W. W. Norton, 2014, originally published 2001).

<sup>34</sup> William C. Wohlforth and Vladislav Zubok, ‘An Abiding Antagonism: Realism, Idealism, and the Mirage of Western-Russian Partnership after the Cold War’, *International Politics*, Vol. 54, No. 4, 2017, pp. 405-19.

<sup>35</sup> This section draws on my *The Putin Paradox*.

Soviet recreation.<sup>36</sup> Support for Putin is ‘neither irrational, strange, nor symptomatic of a “Russian” affinity for authoritarianism’. To the contrary, it results ‘logically from the social disarray and the political ostracism that afflicted most Russians in the 1990s’.<sup>37</sup> Putinism is a distinctive synthesis of authoritarian managerial practices and democratic proceduralism, neoliberal social policies and neo-Soviet paternalism, partial decommunisation and hesitant destalinisation, and a combination of adaptation and resistance to the US-led liberal international order. In short, Putinism is a distinctive sort of ‘state populism’, in which enduring popular majorities identify themselves as ‘the people’ though alignment with the leader, a process reinforced by external pressure on the ‘Putin regime’ as well as by typically ineffectual domestic opposition.<sup>38</sup> In short, Putin’s rule is a classic case of a passive revolution.

Antonio Gramsci’s notion of ‘passive revolution’ suggests a process of gradual change that ultimately transforms the character of a society. Contrasting Italy’s slow evolution in the nineteenth century into a bourgeois society to France’s various revolutionary breaks, Gramsci noted that over the course of decades profound institutional and political changes can take place without a revolutionary rupture.<sup>39</sup> The great paradox of Putinism is that the very political passivity that he inculcated provided the conditions for Russia’s profound but gradual transformation into a bourgeois (although uneven) democracy. Putin was able to forge what in Gramscian terms is called a ‘historic bloc’, the combination of interests and ideas to create what is taken to be ‘common-sense’, an appreciation of what is normal and appropriate for the times. This can be summed up by the idea of ‘conservative modernisation’, in which the two elements, just like the broader political system, are combined in a relatively stable equilibrium. The system is conservative rather than reactionary, appealing to traditional conservative values such as social stability, a historical version of the family structure and its perceived social values, the repudiation of radical change and above all revolution, the appeal to patriarchal paternalism accompanied by a neo-Soviet commitment to social security, state paternalism and social emancipation, above all for women. In other words, to be a conservative in post-communist conditions is different than being a conservative in a mature democracy (the radicalisation of conservatism in these countries is another issue).<sup>40</sup> In Russia conservatism is still genuinely conservative, in the Burkean sense; it does not exclude ameliorative change and sensible reform, but it eschews a vision of transformation based on an ideological programme.<sup>41</sup>

Sovietism without communism of the Putinite sort has deep resonance within Russia, but is it an enduring historical or international phenomenon, even if elements are replicated elsewhere and will no doubt be repeated in Russia? From this perspective, the moniker ‘Putinism’ is inappropriate. Putinism is not a movement with an enduring structure that will outlast the rule of its founder. It not an original programme for the transformation of economy and society, and its foreign policy is in line with that pursued by Russia for decades if not centuries. It is not an ideology in which adherents can have faith, providing coherent answers to the mysteries of national fate and destiny. Putinism is a rational response to

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Joshua Yaffa, *Between Two Fires: Truth, Ambition, and Compromise in Putin’s Russia* (London, Granta Books, 2020).

<sup>37</sup> Carine Clément, ‘Putin, Patriotism and Political Apathy’, 19 October 2015, <https://booksandideas.net/Putin-Patriotism-and-Political-Apathy.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Clément, ‘Putin, Patriotism and Political Apathy’.

<sup>39</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), pp. 105-20

<sup>40</sup> Paul Robinson, *Russian Conservatism* (DeKalb, IL, Northern Illinois University Press, 2019).

<sup>41</sup> Elena Chebankova, ‘Contemporary Russian Conservatism’, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 2016, pp. 28-54.

immediate challenges, and to that extent gains support if not adherents. It lacks a transcendent quality that offers a better vision of the future or which could be substantively appealing to other countries.

Putin provided answers to many of the questions facing post-communist Russia. Putinism may not have been the ideal solution, but in the harsh conditions of a country trying to reconstitute itself from the debris of a collapsed social order and in which the dominant external powers, generously but misguidedly, tried not only to turn Russia into a new version of themselves but also to render it a subaltern international power, Putin's solutions were cogent and logical. Ultimately, Putin did not repudiate the principles on which post-communist Russia was founded, and thus remains heir to the aspirations of the anti-communist democratic revolution of the late Soviet period. Equally, Putin remains loyal to the vision of an independent Russia enshrined in the Declaration of State Sovereignty of 12 June 1990. No less important, the country's political economy remains market capitalism, although with a state corporatist neo-patrimonial twist. In all respects Putin is transactional, believing that what works in a given situation is best. Putin tamed the extremes of leftist restoration and right-wing revanchism, and drew on the power of the four main ideological-interest currents to preside over an unprecedented era of political consensus, and even of concord. However, this has been achieved in a bureaucratic manner and in a technocratic style to achieve mechanical solidarity.

An anti-revolutionary ethos underpins the transactional and pragmatic Putin phenomenon. Events since 1991 represent some sort of 'restoration', as after the English Revolution in 1660 and Napoleonic France in 1815. In both cases, the achievements of the earlier period were incorporated into the new system, although shorn of their radicalism. There is no attempt to reverse the results of the revolution, but the principles on which the revolution was conducted are repudiated. In the Russian case, Putin not only incorporated much of the welfare benefits of the Soviet system into his social policy and reproduced a Soviet-style social contract of stability and progress in return for political passivity, but at the same time he accepted the results of the liberal revolution of the 1990s. Putin came under pressure from both the Communists and liberals like Alexei Navalny to challenge the 'loans-for-shares' privatisations of the mid-1990s, but apart from the appropriation of the Yukos oil company (for a specific set of reasons), the property settlement of the 1990s remains largely in place. In fact, Putin accelerated the creation of the legal framework for a market economy, and although in rhetorical terms he condemned the excesses of the period, he accepted that he was a legatee of its achievements.<sup>42</sup>

Putin's restoration, in other words, has been very moderate, and it certainly does not represent a counter-revolution. The corollary of Putin's anti-revolutionism is the profound moderation of Russian politics after more than a century of excess. The second half of the nineteenth century saw the increasing radicalisation of the Russian intelligentsia, with some assuming a revolutionary strategy while others adopting more militantly conservative, even reactionary, positions. This culminated in one of the most radical events of the twentieth century, the Bolshevik revolution. The extreme wing of the revolutionary socialist movement then imposed perhaps the world's most ambitious attempt to eradicate market relations, although tempered by numerous tactical retreats. In the end, the success of the project proved its greatest failing. The refusal even in the post-Stalin years to integrate market mechanisms into the planned economy (the Chinese-style 'communism of reform' gambit) ultimately provoked inefficiency, declining growth rates, shortage of consumer goods and services, and ultimately the collapse of the system. Once again, as in 1917, rather than an evolutionary

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<sup>42</sup> See Daniel Treisman, *The Return: Russia's Journey from Gorbachev to Medvedev* (London, Simon & Schuster, 2011), pp. 197-239.



transformation, 1991 saw systemic collapse and the disintegration of the country. And once again, a radical faction of the intelligentsia drove forward a plan for the transformation of the country in a form of anti-communist neo-Bolshevism.<sup>43</sup> In comparison to his predecessors, Putin is the great moderator. This is the fundamental source of his popularity. He represents a period of stabilisation after the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary storms that have wracked the country for over a century. A ‘passive revolution’, in all meanings, makes sense in this context.

A moderate is someone who tracks a path between extremes, and this is the essence of Putinism. The passive revolution over which Putin presides draws on certain neoliberal ideas, but Putin is far from being a neoliberal, and the same applies to neo-traditionalism. His conservatism does not embrace such positions as banning abortions, although the percentage of Russians who consider the practice unacceptable has tripled over the last 20 years, from 12 to 35 per cent.<sup>44</sup> The centre, as these data show, is never static but shifts with the currents of political passion and interests; but Putin has moderated the political consequences of the shifts. There is a normative core to moderation, as well as a sociological and historical foundation. Just as Charles II after the Restoration in 1660 sought to draw the passion out of politics, and thus tempered the radicalism that had provoked the Civil War, so the Putinite restoration focuses on pragmatic and technocratic consolidation and conservative modernisation. Equally, after the great transformative storm unleashed by the French Revolution in 1789, the Directory and then Napoleon Bonaparte sought to incorporate the positive without the radicalism of the revolutionary period, although it would take another half century after his final defeat in 1815 before France entered a proto-Putinite period of consolidation under Napoleon III.

Moderation is not abstract but has fundamental policy consequences. Putin’s resistance to the practices of Western hegemony resulted in his demonization, but he remains a moderate in foreign and domestic policy. In systemic terms, the Ukraine crisis was provoked by the radicalisation of all parties – Russia’s politics of resistance and neo-revisionism, the unmediated expansion of the Atlantic security system through NATO enlargement or bilateral US links, and the EU’s un-negotiated attempt to enlarge its sphere of influence to the East – but within that framework Putin’s response could have been far more extreme. Intervention in Crimea certainly represented the repudiation of the ‘rules-based’ system as formulated after 1945, but from the Kremlin’s perspective, these rules had long been infringed by the Western powers when it suited them (the Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights is often mentioned in this context, as well as recognition of Kosovo’s independence), including the ‘coup’ that overthrew the legitimately elected leader of Ukraine. Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the head of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), was pressing for Moscow to occupy the whole of Ukraine to liberate it from ‘fascist occupation’ and to restore a legitimate government in Kiev, while the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) also sought to free Ukraine from the fascist yoke. A similar argument can be made about the Syrian intervention, when ‘Putin was the moderate who saved Syria from destruction’.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinski, *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms: Market Bolshevism against Democracy* (Washington, DC, The United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001).

<sup>44</sup> ‘Percentage of Russians Condemning Abortion has Tripled in 20 Years’, *Orthodox Christianity*, 12 January 2018, <http://orthochristian.com/109867.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Nick Ivanov, ‘The West Doesn’t Realize how Moderate Vladimir Putin Really Is’, *Russiafeed.com*, 23 January 2018, <http://russiafeed.com/west-doesnt-realize-how-moderate-vladimir-putin-really-is/>.

Putin is in the Bonapartist tradition in seeking to fuse the left and the right, offering a combination of stability and reform.<sup>46</sup> A Bonapartist situation is one where social forces are equally balanced (in our case between the bureaucracy and nascent political representations of the middle class), allowing the regime to act with autonomy. Promoted as the ideology of reconciliation (comparable to *trasformismo* in late nineteenth century Italy, see below), the inconclusive nature of the system takes the form of a dual state, with all of its inherent contradictions and accompanying stalemate. This is accompanied by the rejection of class politics, although when under pressure (as in 2012) Putin took advantage of his support among blue collar and industrial workers to threaten the insurgent ‘angry urbanites’, the nascent middle class demanding equal political inclusion and free and fair elections. At the same time, although political conformity is necessary for career progression, the Putin system does not demand internalised loyalty. It is not an ideological regime, and instead passivity or formal conformity is enough, and even criticism is welcomed as long as it remains within the discursive bounds established by the regime. This provides a respite for social peace and the pacification of political extremes, but it can hardly inspire. While China retains a belief in ‘the Marxist vision of a purposeful, ever-forward-moving, scientifically progressive history, one where the future is always better than the past’,<sup>47</sup> post-communist Russia is rarely marked by such historical optimism.

Putin forged a historical bloc out of the forces advancing the conservative modernisation project – the industrial managers, the working class, the bureaucracy, the organic intellectuals (Gramsci’s term for the intelligentsia serving the needs of a given hegemonic order), and even elements of the progressive statist intelligentsia concerned about Russia’s place in the world. All bought in to the Putinite model, while none were entirely satisfied. All have a stake but none can predominate. In class terms Putin speaks for the industrial working class, blue collar workers and the vast state apparatus, while fostering the development of a consumer middle class while constraining their class power. Even intellectuals have bought into his vision of a sovereign Russia conducting its independent foreign policy, while endorsing the limitations on oligarch power at home and the redevelopment of the country’s industrial and technological base. Of course, traditional intellectuals chafe at the restrictions while the middle class strives to become a ‘bourgeoisie’, where their representations of common sense become hegemonic. Instead, the Putin system spawned a vast army of ‘organic’ intellectuals, serving the needs of the regime itself. No class could pursue a hegemonic strategy, while each receives a degree of satisfaction from the system.

In ideological terms Putin revived the hallowed Italian tradition of *trasformismo*, a flexible centrist system of government prevalent from the mid-1880s after Italian unification. Putin’s reliance on the four major epistemic blocs structuring the Russian intellectual-interest community means that he pursues some liberal policies, but his administration is not liberal; and the same goes for the security-conservative-preservative tradition (the *siloviki-okhraniteli*), the neo-traditionalists and the Eurasianists. The Soviet one-party system prevented the development of a classic Western European-type party system, and conditions in post-communist Russia were not conducive to the belated construction of a classic left-right party system of the sort that in any case has been eroding in Europe. As a result, Putin reproduced an archaic method of political management, but one which was also becoming ‘post-modern’ in post-industrial societies. This is a result of the mimetic character of much of

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<sup>46</sup> Karl Marx, ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte’, in *Marx and Engels: Selected Works in One Volume* (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1968), p. 99.

<sup>47</sup> Kerry Brown, ‘What Has Karl Marx Ever Done for China?’, *The Diplomat*, 14 May 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/what-has-karl-marx-ever-done-for-china/>.

Putinism. To satisfy the neo-traditionalists, he went through the motions of restoring elements of the Soviet system; to please the *siloviki*, he restored their status and privileges; and his pragmatic turn to the East allowed Eurasianists of various stripes to support his leadership. However, the problem of drawing on the forms and not the substance of the various factions is at its most acute when it comes to the liberals. Here the mimetic quality is not so easy to square with the need to create genuine institutions that can sustain economic competitiveness, entrepreneurialism, the rule of law and civic dignity. While mimetic practices draw the sting from reactionary forces, it also enervates the constitutional foundations of the state that Putin proclaims to be building.

Putin is hardly alone in his rejection of revolution as a form of political change, but his aversion to spontaneous change from below is constitutive of his political identity and a core element of anything that might be called Putinism. This is one of the fundamental reasons why the contradictions with the Atlantic system gained such explosive force. The Kremlin leadership became convinced it was the West that had become revisionist and sought to achieve ‘regime change’ to put in place new leaderships in the post-Soviet space (and the Middle East) more amenable to Western interests. So-called ‘colour-revolutions’ from this perspective seek to align regimes with the West’s security interests, the process of ‘transdemocracy’: the combination of democracy promotion (sometimes taking forceful forms) and security as a way of creating the conditions for ‘democratic peace’.<sup>48</sup> Putin is a legitimist – the belief that legally constituted regimes should be defended, whatever type of system they espouse; and hence the Atlantic system’s surprising adoption of strategies for revolutionary regime change was so disturbing for him (and for the Chinese leadership).

Putin’s ideological aversion to revolution, reinforced by the anti-revolutionary current in late Soviet thinking, resulted in his typically pragmatic consequential approach. The disastrous results of Western interventions and most of the Arab spring revolts only reinforced critiques of forced regime change, which in the post-Soviet space takes the form of support for anti-Russian forces. Legitimism is a reasonable position for a Kremlin leader, but becomes dysfunctional when not accompanied by recognition that oppressed peoples have the right to demand change, that corrupt and self-serving elites are hardly likely to give up power without pressure from below, and that legitimacy is derived not only from the way that a regime is constituted but also from its conformity with the norms of international, constitutional and natural law. Putin was right to criticise the instrumental and selective mobilisation of these principles by the Atlantic powers, but this does not mean that they should not be applied at all. The rejection of double standards does not mean the repudiation of the standards themselves.

Putin does not promise a substantive future and is very modest in his ambitions. There is a crisis of utopian thinking and action, accompanied by the longing for the mythic era of stability and order of the late Soviet years. The very modesty marks an explicit break with the exaggerated utopianism of the Soviet period, and also with the unrealistic expectations generated in the transition from communism. This is in keeping with Putin’s persistent attempt to deradicalise Russian politics by removing ‘the political’ from politics. Putinism lacks a long-term perspective for the development of society and a people. Russia had been part of the Soviet future (although its national identity in that project had been diluted), and it was now intent on recovering its past to forge its own future. Putin is resolutely a pragmatic and transactional leader, and rejects any transformative agenda in day-to-day politics. Putin focuses on incremental gains and the resolution of immediate problems. He rejects the grand schemes advanced by three of the four epistemic blocs, forcing him closer to the

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<sup>48</sup> Richard Sakwa, *Russia against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 98-104.

conservative-guardianship perspective. For much of the post-Soviet generation, utopian schemes for the betterment of humanity represent a dangerous illusion with potentially disastrous consequences for the societies on which these ‘experiments’ are conducted. Anti-utopianism generates a sceptical stance towards the socialist tradition, which is predicated on the possibility of the substantive amelioration of society, but it also deprives Putinism of a substantive core. By repudiating a long-term programme that could transcend immediate narrow horizons, the Putin system became trapped in a continuous present.<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, some sort of renewed revolutionary activity would appear the only way to escape the passive revolution.

## Conclusion

‘Putinism’ comprises many disparate elements, but there is no single synthesis. It is far from the single-minded ruthlessness of the great ideological projects of the twentieth century. Rejecting the idea of revolutionary breakthroughs, Putin presides over a passive revolution which, paradoxically, has been as revolutionary in its consequences as any of the major ruptures in Russian history. There is no coherent and consistent theory underpinning Putin’s politics, but there is a persistent set of principles. In economic policy Putin was ready to privatise or effectively nationalise industries when appropriate, and he pursues an industrial strategy to develop priority sectors. This does not add up to a grand vision based on the anti-communitarian and individualistic logic of economic freedom and competitiveness. Putin’s political practice is a combination of four historical styles which together do not add up to a coherent philosophy but they do provide a framework for the development of what he considered to be the public good. Putin’s liberal Westernism means that he remained committed to the institutions of international society as embodied by the UN and other global governance institutions, but his neo-revisionism means that he challenged the practices of global hegemony claimed by the US-led liberal international order, provoking a confrontation that has assumed the forms of a new Cold War. Putin’s cultural conservatism made him popular among certain European populists, but he was careful to guard against this become a full-scale rollback in social policy. Finally, as a sovereign internationalist Putin reasserted Russia’s central role in global affairs in partnership with like-minded states. Putin combined these four processes to create a historical bloc to undertake a passive revolution with incalculable consequences. Putinism represents a synthesis that is a peculiarly Russian response to the problems of post-communist and late capitalist development. Putinism as a style of governance may well be reproduced elsewhere, but none so far has achieved the distinctively Putinite combination of innovation and tradition, of restoration and progress, and ultimately, of stasis and change. The ultimate paradox of Putinism is that it repudiates itself as an ‘ism’.

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<sup>49</sup> See Svetlana Alexievich, *Second-Hand Time* (London, Fitzcarraldo, 2016) for powerful first-hand testimonies of a system that appeared locked in ‘timelessness’ (*bezvremen’e*).