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The Never-Ending Civil War

By Alexei Bayer

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is the most successful Russian leader in five decades. Ever since he became prime minister in 1999 under President Boris Yeltsin, things have gone his way in an almost charmed manner. His position as the country's most powerful man remains secure, and his approval ratings are consistently high. His rivals among oligarchs have either been jailed or pushed out of the country. His friends and judo coaches, along with former dacha neighbors and KGB colleagues, have risen from obscurity to the Forbes list of the richest people in the world. Putin himself, according to various sources, has parlayed his position into a

multibillion-dollar fortune. What's more, he helped secure the hosting of the Winter Olympics in 2014 and the World Cup in 2018.

You would expect the man to be satisfied, vindicated and mellowing out. But Putin remains an angry man, just as brittle and volatile as when he appeared on Russia's political stage more than a decade ago. At news conferences he is quick to get offended, spewing out his trademark put-downs. Putin still holds a grudge against former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky and

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili for whatever slights they inflicted upon him.

But Putin's anger is equally matched by the opposition. Russia has achieved unprecedented prosperity largely because of high oil prices, and despite dark warnings of an imminent return to Soviet-style oppression it has remained open to trade and information. Opposition publications endure, the Internet is free, censorship remains largely absent, and travel is unrestricted.

But criticism of Putin's regime, if anything, is getting harsher. The vitriol that liberal intelligentsia routinely directs against Putin is comparable only to right-wing fringe ravings against U.S. President Barack Obama. Since Russia's best journalists and reporters tend to come from the opposition, we would have probably seen the same anti-Putin coverage on all of the national media if the country's television and major newspapers had not been taken over by the state.

I side with liberal critics who want Russia to become a liberal democracy and to join the West. But I also realize that the two sides — the government and the opposition — are perched at two irreconcilable extremes of the political divide.

The problem is that the country's Civil War, which began in 1918, never really ended. The lines have been redrawn, the combatants have changed, the warfare is no longer in the open, and fighting is rarely bloody. But social peace has not been restored. Soviet-era balladeer Bulat Okudzhava once wrote, "I will still die in the one and only Civil War, and commissars in their dusty caps will bow mutely over me."

The reminders of this low-grade war are everywhere: in the return of Stalin's name to Moscow's Kurskaya metro station and Russia's use of the old Soviet national anthem, its lyrics rejiggered by the same poet, Sergei Mikhalkov, who had penned the original. The recently celebrated Defender of the Fatherland Day actually marks the creation of the Red Army in 1918 and the start of the Civil War. National symbols are meant to bring a nation together. In Russia, they are divisive passwords used to separate "our side" from "theirs."

This endless war has not only destroyed the middle ground but has eviscerated the nation. That is why bureaucrats all over the country — starting in the Kremlin and extending down to the regions, districts and even villages — are robbing the country blind. It is merely the winning side getting its spoils.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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