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# Putin Is Saint and Savior for a Small Cult

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Svetlana Frolova leading a service at her sanctuary in Bolshaya Yelnya, near Nizhny Novogorod. She says Putin is the reincarnation of the apostle Paul. **Natalia Plankina**

BOLSHAYA YELNYA, Nizhny Novgorod Region — Prime Minister Vladimir Putin cultivates the image of a bare-chested macho man, but a nun-like sect in the Nizhny Novgorod region thinks that he's actually the reincarnation of the apostle Paul.

Or, if not that, he may in a past life have been the founder of the Russian Orthodox Church.

"I say what the Lord has revealed to me," said the sect's leader, former convict Svetlana Frolova.

Frolova and her followers are an extreme illustration of a personality cult building up around Putin before the 2012 presidential election.

An opinion poll by the independent Levada Center showed that more than half of Russians believe that a Soviet-style personality cult is being cultivated for Putin, who has refused to say whether he will run for president in the March vote.

"I love Putin as our No. 1, our commander, the captain of our great ship, and he is worthy of our love," said Frolova, who says she was "reborn" as Mother Fotinya after serving a 21-month sentence for fraud in 1996.

She says God spoke to her and revealed that Putin's past lives included that of Grand Prince Vladimir of Rus, credited with founding the Russian Orthodox Church more than a millennia ago.

"Every one of us has many incarnations. St. Paul was indeed one of Putin's," she said in an interview, her high-pitched voice bouncing off the icon-hung walls of her sanctuary in Bolshaya Yelnya, a village near the city of Nizhny Novgorod, some 410 kilometers east of Moscow.

Putin's advisers disclaim any link with the sect led by the former railway manager.

"He does not approve of that kind of admiration," Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said by telephone.

Putin has been at the heart of "the policy and daily life of this country for more than a decade," he said. "Certainly, he is the most popular man in this country and has his own fan clubs, but it isn't any kind of cult."

Putin, for his part, projects a macho, "can do" image despite having stepped down as president in 2008 and steering his protege, Dmitry Medvedev, into the Kremlin's top job.

Described as "alpha-dog" in U.S. diplomatic cables, Putin has a black belt in judo and frequently undertakes testosterone-fueled stunts such as flying a fighter jet or shooting a Siberian tiger.

His opponents say there is every indication that he will remain in charge of Russia, no matter who runs for president in 2012.

Part of his allure is having restored Russians' pride after the chaos of the 1990s and the embarrassment of Boris Yeltsin's sometimes drunken stunts as president, historian Roy Medvedev said.

"The relationship to Putin is more emotional than that toward the average politician. He is seen as a kind of moral leader," said Medvedev, who is no relation of the president.

Frolova's "awakening" while behind bars came as millions of Russians sought comfort in a revival of organized religion or with the cults that were spawned by the thousands after the collapse of the atheist Soviet Union.

Inside her gray-brick retreat, hidden behind tall fences and crowned by spires and a cupola, women in nuns' dress stroll the grounds while the faithful tend to gardening, children clutching at their skirts.

Dressed from headdress to sandals in white robes, Mother Fotinya, 63, preaches a mishmash of values from vegetarianism and anti-abortion to strict bans on modern medicine.

Father Alexei, the village Russian Orthodox priest, shivered with disgust when asked about Frolova and her followers.

"They are unpleasant neighbors. Their so-called faith is a nonsensical mix of Orthodoxy, Catholicism, the occult, superstitions and political prejudice," he said.

But for Frolova, Putin — a portrait of whom she keeps in her bedroom — is the embodiment of a tsar.

"He has the soul of a tsar. It's not by chance that he is now president," she said, sighing.

When reminded that Putin is prime minister while Medvedev is president, she said Putin remained Russia's boss.

"You can be prime minister and still remain president. Medvedev is merely Putin's student," she said.

In any case, she said, Russia's future has already been decided. "Do you remember how Putin became president? Yeltsin gave his post up to him. God willing, Medvedev will do the same," she said. "Everything has been decided by God."

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