

Reformer Stolypin Held Up as Model for Putin

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A 1910 portrait of Stolypin, known for his economic reforms, by Ilya Repin.

ST. PETERSBURG — As Russia marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of Pyotr Stolypin, the pre-revolutionary interior minister and chairman of the imperial Council of Ministers, political analysts are scrutinizing his legacy and suggesting that President Vladimir Putin should emulate him to successfully conduct economic reforms.

At a special roundtable at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June, economists and politicians drew parallels between the two leaders, the political environment in Stolypin's Russia and Putin's Russia, and the need for reforms.

For one thing, Stolypin managed to calm the tumult among the peasantry through land reforms. Some pundits see a similar task facing Putin with the so-called "creative class" — well-educated young people eager for greater political freedoms who are demanding the Kremlin's attention through protests.

"Putin needs to do the same for today's misplaced creative class that Stolypin did for the peasantry: Stolypin's resettlement program involved granting land to immigrants across the country," said Sergei Karaganov, dean of the Moscow-based School of World Economics and Intellectual Affairs. "Because the creative class is feeling tangibly isolated in Russia — which is resulting in mass emigration on the one hand, and mass protests on the other — the task is to integrate them successfully and give them a sense of purpose."

Putin clearly sees Stolypin as a role model, repeatedly praising him for his stamina, wisdom, patriotism, and ability to achieve transformation through gradual moves.

Similar to Stolypin's efforts to lift up the peasantry, Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev have both attempted to improve life for people outside the working class.

Putin has targeted teachers, doctors and army officers, who have all seen major salary increases, while Medvedev is nurturing ambitious plans for the Skolkovo innovation center, which will provide opportunities for Russian scientists.

But these efforts have yet to pay off in the way that Stolypin's reforms empowering the peasantry did.

"Today's Russian leaders have so far failed to unleash Russia's intellectual potential in the way Stolypin unleashed economic potential in Russia by granting private landownership to the peasantry," Karaganov said.

Karaganov suggested that one possible solution could be to motivate the members of the country's intellectual elite to relocate and work in far-flung places like Siberia and the Far East.

The ill-fated Stolypin, who was assassinated in Kiev in 1911 at the peak of his career, possessed another quality instrumental to both his success as well as his downfall: loyalty to the throne.

Many believe it is this quality that appeals to Putin, who has made loyalty a crucial requirement for entering state service in modern Russia.

Stolypin was ready to carry out his reforms only in tsarist Russia, refusing to consider a move away from the monarchy since he viewed it as a betrayal of the tsar, who had allowed him to manage the country. Stolypin's inability to think beyond the existing economic model effectively made his departure inevitable.

Was Stolypin a successful politician? For Vadimir Mau, rector of the government's Academy of National Economy and State Service, there is no coherent answer.

"Every new generation of Russians will perhaps offer its own view and its own judgment on the activities of people like Pyotr Stolypin or Yegor Gaidar," Mau said. Gaidar was Russia's first prime minister after the fall of the Soviet Union. His "shock therapy" economic reforms were seen as essential by some and blamed for the poverty and hyperinflation of the mid-1990s by others.

"According to the logic of a bureaucrat, Stolypin was indeed successful, because out of all

of the prime ministers of the Russian Empire, he became the most durable in the job. He halted revolution and launched deep reforms," Mau said.

"Yet at the same time he fell victim to an assassin and failed to complete the reforms he had started. Most important, he never achieved his most ambitious goal, which was to turn Russia into a great country within the span of 20 years without going to war," he said.

What Putin apparently also likes about Stolypin is that the minister, who carried out his reforms during a systematic crisis and dealt with issues from land management to terrorism, never indulged in wordy self-justifications, and no task appeared to humble him.

Responsibility was key to Stolypin's rule. The minister possessed both the courage to adopt unpopular measures — he introduced the courts-martial as a means of combating revolutionary terror — and the sense of responsibility to be held accountable for them. The chilling nickname of "the hangman" was perhaps the mildest of the consequences.

It is no coincidence that Putin made responsibility the topic of his speech at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum.

But Pavel Pozhigailo, president of the Stolypin Foundation in Moscow, said the key to the success of Stolypin's reforms was that they addressed specific sections of society and in that way had an impact on the nation as a whole.

"Stolypin's reforms were smartly conceived so that they created opportunities for different people to find their place in society and opportunities that allowed them to make money and build careers," he said.

"When he took office, 84 out of 88 Russian provinces were engulfed in riots. Stolypin helped these people to find a way out of their misery by opening up their creative potential, and it worked."

It is this very quality, however, that many believe Putin is lacking. He is often criticized for ignoring not only individuals, but whole segments of Russian society, namely the more radical wings of the political opposition and nongovernmental organizations that challenge the authorities.

"Perhaps the most important lesson we can glean from Stolypin's life is that a reformer must not allow himself to become hostage to the interests of a certain political party, or to be identified with a particular group representing specific interests," Mau said.

"Rather, a reformer should stand above parties and factions, pursuing strategic goals with as much determination as they can muster."

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