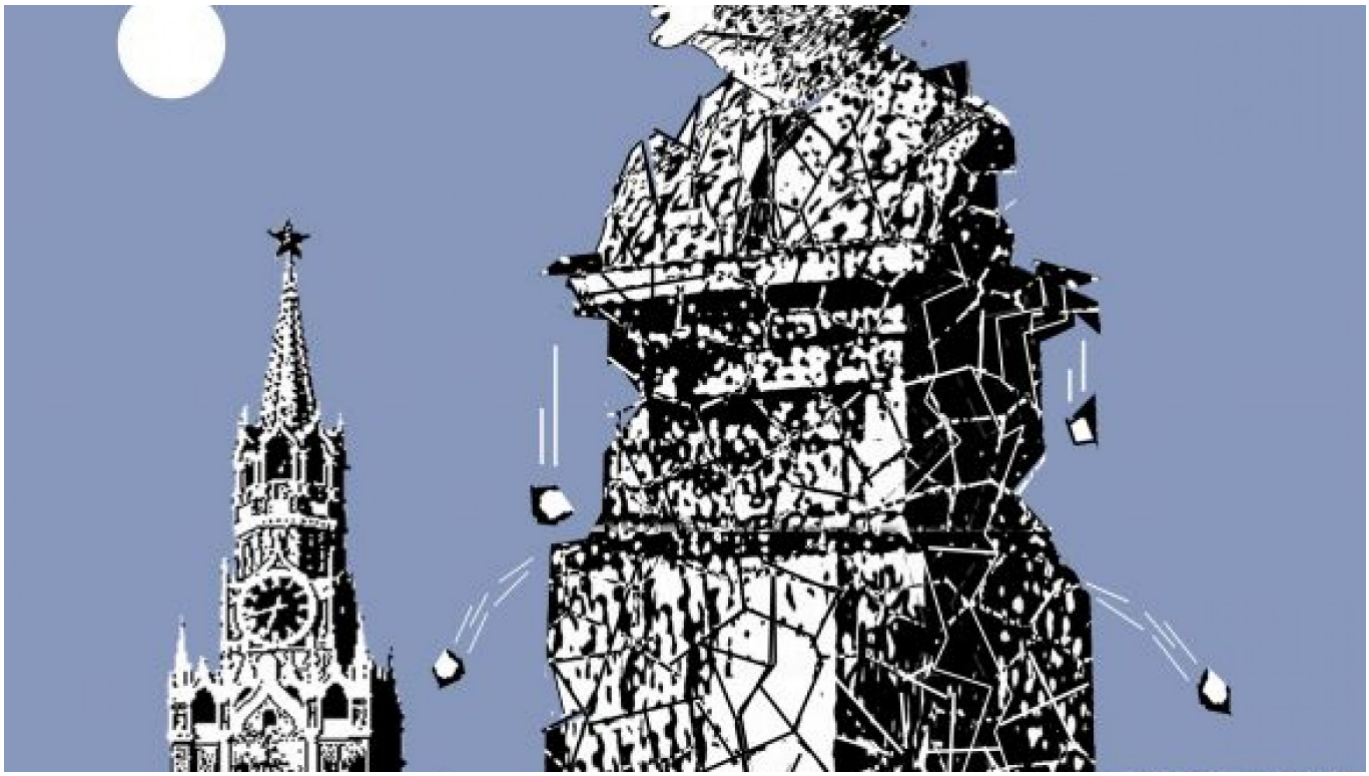
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

# The 4 Stages of Putinism

By Andrei Piontkovsky

March 05, 2013



In 1970, Soviet dissident Andrei Amalrik observed in "Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?" that "all totalitarian regimes grow old without realizing it." Amalrik was correct, and the regime established since 2000 by President Vladimir Putin is likely to fall apart — perhaps this year — for the same reason that the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.

It should be remembered that the Soviet Union's collapse was not the result of President Mikhail Gorbachev's reformist "betrayal." Nor was it caused by falling oil prices or U.S. President Ronald Reagan's military buildup. Soviet communism was doomed long before then, when, as Amalrik predicted, the Communist myth finally died in the hearts and minds of ordinary people and officials alike.

In a mere 13 years, Putin's regime, with its grand ideological style, has passed through all of the stages of Soviet history, becoming a vulgar parody of each.

The first stage, that of creating the regime's legitimizing myth, generates a heroic demiurge, the father of the nation. Whereas the Bolsheviks had the 1917 revolution, the Putinists had the second Chechen war of 1999 and the bombings of apartment buildings in Buynaksk,

Moscow and Volgodonsk that year. Thus was born the myth of the heroic intelligence officer who protects Russians in their homes while terrifying the nation's enemies.

The second stage could be called the period of storms and stresses. Stalin thrived on the barbaric forced industrialization that planted the seeds of the Communist system's destruction. Putin, for his part, "built" a great energy power, turning the country into a banana republic with hydrocarbons.

The third stage extends the myth through heroic triumph. The Soviets had their victory in World War II, followed by the creation of a global superpower. Putinism claimed victory after invading tiny Georgia in 2008.

Finally, the regime suffers ideological exhaustion and death. This stage of Soviet communism took 40 years to run its course. But a simulacrum falls apart much faster. Putin's four-hour news conference in December recalled Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu's demise at a staged mass meeting in 1989, when he was confronted by heckling and protests.

Indeed, Russia is already living in the post-Putin era, because Putin can no longer perform his main mission: providing security for a plutocracy. As in 1999, when President Boris Yeltsin had outlived his usefulness to the elites, the current infighting among elite factions means only one thing: A search is under way for a successor. The question is no longer whether Putin's regime will survive but what will come after him.

The coming transition will be markedly different from the 1999 transfer of power. It will not be a palace affair, replete with a "patriotic," television-driven mobilization of the masses against terrorists and the Western nemesis. The current process is more like what happened in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 and the Soviet Union in 1991, with protesters' enthusiasm giving way to disappointment as individual members of the old regime retained economic and quasi-political power.

Indeed, a potential heir today needs legitimacy, not only from the powerful tycoons but also from the street. That is why Kremlin-friendly "liberals," or loyalists who stand for Kremlin-backed change, want to control the protest movement and use it as a lever in an ultimate fight with the siloviki, Putin's military and security apparatus.

Kremlin-loyal liberals believe that Russia has, on the whole, built an acceptable market economy. Its further development requires only the removal of some of Putin's cronies through controlled political reform. Until recently, the loyalists argued that the quest for change precludes criticizing the government, which should somehow be influenced through constructive suggestions. Demands for Putin's resignation would lead only to the marginalization of the protest movement.

Today, however, the loyalists' rhetoric is more aggressive. They now argue that Putin personally chose repression in responding to the protest movement that filled the streets of Moscow and other major cities in late 2011 and early 2012. Politicians who see no alternative to tribunals and criminal prosecutions cannot be respected.

The evolution of the loyalists' position is not coincidental. They must consider the mood of the protest movement as well as opinion polls, which suggest that their popular support

lags behind the "republicans" by a 9-to-1 margin. "Republicans" believe that uprooting the entire political and economic system that was established in the Yeltsin years — and consolidated under Putin — is a task of national salvation.

More important, over the past few months, the loyalists' strategic vision has changed. Back in October, they planned to negotiate with Putin about replacing him in a year or so. The idea was to appoint a more "liberal" factotum, such as former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin or billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov.

But something went wrong. Putin could not be convinced. At the same time, he has become unable to control infighting among the elites. As his opponents have hardened their stance, Russia has become ripe for a peaceful anti-criminal revolution. Even if Putin left this year, that would not be enough. Russia and its people can triumph only if Kremlin loyalists seeking his successor leave with him.

Andrei Piontkovsky is a political scientist and visiting fellow at the Hudson Institute in Washington. © Project Syndicate

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

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/03/05/the-4-stages-of-putinism-a22093