The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin Revives Russian Exceptionalism

By Michael Bohm

September 26, 2013



Of all the lines from President Vladimir Putin's Sept. 11 op-ed in The New York Times, the one that attracted the most attention was his dig at so-called American exceptionalism.

"It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation," Putin wrote.

But Putin's understanding of "American exceptionalism" is off the mark. It is also hypocritical, given Russia's rich and long history of its own exceptionalism.

Putin's brand of Russian exceptionalism is defined by his anti-Americanism and his single-

handed mission
to restore
Russia's imperial
greatness.

The concept of American exceptionalism is by no means about Americans believing that they are more honest, hardworking, democratic or otherwise superior to people from other nations. Nor is it about the U.S. "exporting democracy" to other countries through military interventions.

Instead, American exceptionalism is based on a much more banal and objective notion: that the historical and democratic development of the U.S. stands out as unique — or exceptional — in the world. While most countries developed on common ethnic, racial or religious grounds, the U.S. was founded and developed on a set of principles and ideals, such as inherent and inalienable individual rights, freedom of speech, private property protection, rule of law and an ingrained system of checks and balances against government abuse.

As British writer G.K. Chesterton famously said, "America is the only nation in the world founded on a creed."

This sense of American exceptionalism was also well-captured by French writer Alexis de - Tocqueville in his 1840 classic, "Democracy in America."

At the same time, however, you could argue that there is nothing particularly exceptional about Americans thinking they are exceptional. After all, most nations think they are special and unique in their own ways. U.S. President Barack Obama perhaps expressed this idea best during his first overseas trip as president in 2010 when he said, "I believe in American exceptionalism — just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism."

Yet Obama should have put Russia at the top of that list. Throughout its 1,000-year history, Russia has always had a strong belief in its own exceptionalism. During the Russian empire, it was based on what the people considered to be their unique spirituality, their "osoby put" (a unique path of development and set of values that are neither Western nor Eastern), and the notion that Russia was the Third Rome — the successor to the Byzantine Empire.

Russian exceptionalism took a sharp turn to the left during the 1917 Revolution, when the country under the Bolsheviks became the birthplace of revolutionary socialism, Marxist-Leninist communism and the dictatorship of the proletariat.

In the early Soviet period, Russian exceptionalism centered on the idea that Russia was destined to become the single ideological force and inspiration to overthrow the "international bourgeoisie" and spark proletariat-communist revolutions all over the world.

During the post-World War II period, Russian exceptionalism took the form of forcibly implanting socialism and communism in Eastern Europe and other parts of the world and propagandizing the notion that the communist system produced the world's leading

scientific and industrial advances.

After the Soviet collapse and during the chaotic 1990s, President Boris Yeltsin had far too many other serious problems to worry about than tooting Russia's horn about being exceptional. But when Putin came to power in 2000, he went out of his way to revive the notion of Russian exceptionalism.

Putin's brand of Russian exceptionalism has been defined by its anti-Americanism. Putin is determined to turn Russia into the only leading world power that can stand up firmly to the U.S., including using its veto power to defeat U.S. initiatives in the United Nations Security Council. Under Putin, it has become Russia's single-handed mission to put Washington in its place by condemning its blatant double standards, violations of human rights and interventionist foreign policy. Putin's stinging "Munich speech" in 2007 that denounced U.S. unilateralism and interventionism became a showcase example of his — and Russia's — exceptional role in facing down the U.S.

Another vivid example of Russian exceptionalism was Putin's speech at Luzhniki stadium on Feb. 23, 2012, on Defenders of the Fatherland Day. "We will not allow someone to impose their will on us because we have our own will!" Putin roared to a cheering crowd of more than 50,000 supporters. "We are a victorious people! It is in our genes and in our genetic code!"

Those remarks make American exceptionalism look tame in comparison.

What's more, Putin has revived the tsarist version of Russian exceptionalism by actively promoting the Russian Orthodox Church, Russia's unique spirituality and "osoby put" by stressing that Russia does not adhere to Western cultural values. The overly harsh sentence of two years in a labor prison handed down to three Pussy Riot rockers for their "blasphemous" 40-second performance in Moscow's main cathedral last year and the anti-gay propaganda law that Putin signed in June are just two recent examples of this.

In addition, the Syrian conflict shows that Russia is "exceptional" in another way: It is the only major global power that backs Syrian President Bashar Assad and propagandizes his groundless claim that rebel forces committed the chemical weapons attack on Aug. 21.

Notably, the key difference between Russian and American exceptionalism is that the U.S. version is defined by protecting individual rights and instituting constitutional checks and balances that limit the power of the government, while Russian exceptionalism has always focused on the direct opposite — strengthening the power of the state at the expense of individual freedom. According to Putin's model, the strong state is the guarantor of Russian exceptionalism, with the Russian Orthodox Church serving as its spiritual and moral guardian.

Putin's heavy reliance on these "hard power" tactics of ruling the country means that his attempts to also apply "soft power" — including using the U.S. public relations firm Ketchum to place his op-ed piece in The New York Times — have done little to improve Russia's image abroad.

Perhaps, then, the best two pieces of advice Ketchum can give Putin are: One, since autocrats aren't very good at being soft, stick with what you do best — hard power. Two, given how

strongly Russia displays its own exceptionalism, it's probably best to leave American exceptionalism alone.

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