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50 Shades of Putinism: A Legacy of Repression

By Vladimir Frolov

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Like every aging world leader, President Vladimir Putin is thinking about his legacy. He has given himself ample time for that by hinting recently that he might run for president again in 2018.

Intended as a "don't hold your breath" message to the edgy elites looking for early signs of his retirement, it marks the launch of Putin's legacy campaign, in which he seeks to lock in a distinct vision for Russia's future that will transcend his rule.

At its heart is the "mid-level-KGB-officer consensus" of the late 1980s. It holds that the Soviet system of centralized government, calibrated political repression, tightly controlled media and superpower ambition was viable and only needed to be stripped of its Marxist economic heresy to allow for private property and market competition.

To compensate for the ideological void left by discarded Marxism, Putin is turning

to conservative — even ultra-right — cultural dogmas, mixed with religious fundamentalism. He skillfully manipulates cultural conservatism to legitimize his grip on power while espousing economic policies that are more in line with leftist doctrines of government patronage, antithetical to conservative values of individual freedom and responsibility.

Anti-Western posturing and positioning Russia as a global counterweight to the U.S. adds domestic legitimacy to Putin's system. A drive for Eurasian integration distracts Russia from building a genuine European democracy. Rejection of Western cultural and political values allows Putin to claim Russia's uniqueness and argue for a special path of development that requires his continued guidance from the top. One party rule is replaced by one-man rule.

Putin is resolute in not allowing any independent alternative vision for Russia's future to emerge as a strong contender for power. Casting legitimate dissenting opinions as attempts to purposefully diminish and weaken Russia helps him evade the debate on its merits.

Instead, he is willing to encourage competition between different strands of Putinism, carefully casting the contenders from among its proven adherents. Voters will be able to chose between Dmitry Rogozin, Sergei Shoigu, Alexei Kudrin, Mikhail Prokhorov, Ksenia Sobchak or any of the other 50 shades of Putinism, with the vote being free and fair. Lacking, however, will be a vision for Russia beyond Putinism.

There is a country that runs its politics in a similar fashion. It is the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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