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The Apotheosis of Putin

By Alexei Bayer

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After the rule of Augustus, Rome developed an imperial cult in which emperors were declared gods, and shrines were built to venerate them. Some religious and nationalist authorities declare that Russia, the heir to Byzantium, is the Third Rome. It's no surprise that it, too, has developed a version of the imperial cult — albeit a strange variation of it.

Only Vladimir Lenin has been deified, and even though the state he founded no longer exists and his role in Russian history has been revised from highly positive to highly negative, his mausoleum still stands on the Red Square, and considerable state resources are devoted to keep his mummy going.

But rulers who came after Lenin, while often worshipped during their lifetime, were maligned once they died or lost power. True, over the past 100 years the country's political establishment tried to fight the tendency to deify the leader. Nikita Khrushchev inveighed against Stalin's personality cult, but then he built his own. He was overthrown in coup that proclaimed a new era of collective leadership, but a decade later Leonid Brezhnev emerged as an official deity, showered with accolades and awarded dozens of medals.

Soviet and Russian leaders have tended to stamp their personalities on the entire country. Khrushchev was bumbling, energetic and a bit naive. This is how I remember the Soviet Union of the early 1960s and how it comes through in literature and on film. Brezhnev's dotage colored the Soviet Union of the 1970s and the 1980s, making it flaccid, self-absorbed and senile.

The same tendency continued in the post-Soviet era. Former President Boris Yeltsin was a lush, and throughout the 1990s the country drank heavily, with alcohol of varying quality available around the clock and on every corner.

There is no question that Putin has shaped the mood of the nation. Dmitry Medvedev was timid, ineffectual and had no real power as president from 2008 to 2012, but he introduced a more gentle tone. Since Putin's return, however, there has been more divisiveness in society, and public debate turned harsher, meaner and more vindictive.

It doesn't have to be all bad. Russia would do well to emulate Putin's obsession with staying young and healthy, concern with personal safety and a lifestyle that is free of tobacco and alcohol. Unfortunately, Putin's love of sports has translated only into a preponderance of athletes in the State Duma and the splurge of the Sochi Olympics.

The Winter Games, in particular, are Putin's personal vanity project and the veritable triumph of one man's will. For better or worse, he conceived it, pushed it through the International Olympic Committee and got a massive winter sports complex and tourist infrastructure built in the subtropics. The Western media rightly termed it Putin's Games. He is all over the place, visiting Russian and foreign athletes and making frequent appearances at competitions.

Many people have said that the Sochi Olympics is Putin's legacy, the monument he is going to leave to the future generation of Russians. This is only partly true. He is now ready to embark on an even more ambitious project with a wider geographic and economic scope: the 2018 soccer World Cup.

During the Olympics, Putin's divine stature has been affirmed. Russian medal winners, sports officials and journalists have been mentioning him at every opportunity, effusively thanking him personally for creating a splendid festival. The years in the run-up to 2018 promise to be a true apotheosis of the Russian president.

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