

Will Putin Become a New Stalin?

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October 08, 2014



Russia almost gave itself a new public holiday this week. A group of citizens proposed creating a day to commemorate the "polite men" who carried guns but had no military insignia when they appeared in Crimea shortly before it was annexed by Russia. And although the Crimean operation took place in March, this group proposed commemorating the event on Oct. 7, President Vladimir Putin's birthday.

The Kremlin turned down the request, but issued a statement reminiscent of the Stalinist era when every Soviet citizen knew how tirelessly their beloved leader labored on their behalf. Putin, it said, would celebrate his 62nd birthday by taking his first day off in 15 years and visiting the Siberian taiga.

"He's just tired," some concluded. "Just look at the most recent pictures of him. He's not himself lately," said others. In a country where, according to polls, fully 80 percent of the population supports the president's political course, the people follow every one of their national leader's moods and moves with rapt attention.

After all, Putin is the one thing holding modern Russia together: Without him, the whole

amazing structure would collapse like a house of cards.

There is a certain irony in the fact that, up until 1991, Putin's birthday actually did coincide with a public holiday: Constitution Day, in honor of Oct. 7, 1977, the day when the last Soviet Constitution was adopted.

That constitution contained many standards guaranteeing an impressive number of rights and freedoms, including the freedom to elect and be elected. It also sets out the complex federal structure on which the Soviet Union was ostensibly patterned.

The problem lay with inconspicuous Article 6, near the beginning of the text. The article secured an exclusive monopoly on power for the Communist Party and rendered meaningless every subsequent guarantee of voting rights and Soviet federalism. The party controlled the country at every level, with bogus institutions only thinly veiling the fact.

Leaders repealed Article 6 in March 1990, and just 18 months later the Soviet Union ceased to exist, in part because some bogus institutions remained fictitious while others, such as the sovereignty of federal entities at different levels, suddenly gained reality.

What is true with regard to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union is also largely true of Putin — who joined the party in 1975 and never officially withdrew his membership. He embodies that system, one that, despite its apparently complex assortment of political parties, regional elites and agencies of state authority, nonetheless lacks institutions capable of effectively serving the public's needs.

Unlike the Soviet Union, in which the agencies for repression were the only real mechanisms in place besides the Communist Party, the repressive apparatus in modern Russia is a mere shadow of its predecessor.

However, because of the endemic corruption, the informal system of buying and selling influence and the longstanding practice among officials of extracting the maximum possible material benefit from their government posts, leaders cannot count on this system to work, even when they issue strict orders from the top. The only constant in this system is Putin himself.

It is an exaggeration to claim that Putin built this entire system himself. True, Putin sought to gain tight control over elections and succeeded in reducing them once again to a sham. He deliberately dismantled the institutional framework of federalism and restored what amounts to one-man rule.

Putin had tradition on his side. That tradition began with the origins of Russia itself, a country that has almost never had truly effective public institutions and whose citizens have always preferred appealing to the will of the monarch, whether it was a prince, emperor or a secretary general.

Putin began as simply a good functionary who was plucked in 1999 from the entourage of decrepit former President Boris Yeltsin in order to protect Yeltsin's security, vested interests and access to the corridors of power after his departure. However, Putin surprised his recruiters by emerging as an intuitive and natural populist.

He was himself a part of the governing system that was already in a state of disrepair, and was familiar with the shadowy players who had something to gain from maintaining a certain level of chaos in the country.

That situation left him with only one realistic path to pursue, and he began taking his first successful steps along it in the early 2000s.

For support, Putin appealed directly to the great mass of the Russian people — to those for whom the word "democracy" had come to be irrevocably associated with the theft of public property, pervasive poverty while a few oligarchs enriched themselves, rampant crime and the prospect of civil war.

After hedging his bets during his first 13 years in office, Putin chose his third presidential term to offer the Russian people an empire.

Their reaction was such as to elicit tears of joy: Their resounding enthusiasm reached such heights that, were he a stage performer, Putin could have thrown himself into the audience to be carried along on their outstretched hands.

In a sense, it was the result of Putin having made the right decisions at each crossroad in his long quest for political survival. But now, at this level of the game, several serious problems have arisen.

First, the game did not end with that thunderous applause. To the contrary, the game continues and his popular acclaim could end at any time — for example, once Russians learn just how much of their family budgets will go toward annexing Crimea and enduring Western sanctions.

Second, Putin must deal not only with his adoring public, but also with the existing political system and a tight circle of backroom "decision-makers."

And even if that system is increasingly dysfunctional and Putin long ago became dissatisfied with those "decision-makers," both have vested interests that they will fight to defend.

Political logic compels Putin to switch into "Stalin mode." Seeing the risk inherent in opening the floodgates of real democracy — a system that the majority of Russians still distrust — while at the same time having to modernize the corrupt Russian state, Putin has no choice but to wage an authoritarian and populist revolution from above.

However, this contradicts Putin's general policy principle of never fully committing to any particular course, but continually juggling multiple options and players to his own best advantage.

Putin should understand the costs of Stalinism and the striking differences between present-day Russia and Stalin's Soviet Union far better than those Russians who place a portrait of Stalin alongside their Orthodox icons.

However, following Stalin's example looks increasingly attractive if Putin wants to stay in the game. He has to remain one step ahead to be prepared for the situation in which he as a point of balance in domestic policy will cease to suit those whom he tries to counterbalance.

Nobody, not even the president's most outspoken opponents, wants to even imagine the chaos that might result if Putin suddenly exits the scene, leaving behind a country with nuclear weapons and weak or ineffective public institutions.

A great many people, including European commentators, politicians and businesspeople who now give looks of condescending reproach at the mention of Putin's name, would prefer a continuation of the Putin they have become accustomed to over the last 15 years to his sudden departure or his possible shift into "Stalin mode."

The problem is, that Putin whom we have all come to know — if not necessarily love — no longer exists. The only question is: Which course will he pursue now?

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Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/10/08/will-putin-become-a-new-stalin-a40196>