

Putin Meets the Ghosts of Christmas Past

By [Mark Galeotti](#)

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As 2014 draws to an end, the ruble tumbles, and no end to the Ukraine adventures seems in sight, President Vladimir Putin seems to be in a bind and out of ideas. He looks to history for both inspiration and legitimacy, though, so raising the shades of three past Russian greats may help present him with options for the future — but also highlight the risks of the present.

First, let us invoke Pyotr Stolypin, prime minister from 1906 to 1911. Putin has praised his "unbending will" and his "personal courage and a willingness to load himself with the entire burden of responsibility for the state of the country." Stolypin led the repression of the 1905 Revolution with ferocity and efficiency, but was a visionary leader who saw that tsarist Russia's Achilles heel was its backward economy, especially its stagnant, communal agriculture.

He set out to create a new class of yeoman farmer, a middle class that could bring greater efficiency to the countryside and in the process become the state's allies and defenders among the peasants.

Of course, Stolypin's "wager on the strong" created more impoverished losers in the peasantry than forward-thinking winners and undermined the residual power of the country gentry. His reforms were bogged down by bureaucratic resistance and peasant resentments, and he was assassinated, possibly even with the foreknowledge of the tsar. His grand designs came to nothing.

So what might Putin's "Stolypin idea" be? In his undistinguished state of the nation speech, he spoke of the need to revive small businesses, which might indeed help address some of the manifest failings of the Russian economy and reassure an increasingly frustrated middle class.

But that "wager on the entrepreneurial" requires much more than just kind words. It needs a thorough revision of the legal framework for small businesses: an end to the parasitic practices of inspectors and bureaucratic gatekeepers, courts willing and able to protect private property, and banks willing to lend.

It would quietly but radically take away the power, perks and illegal but widespread earning opportunities of a wide swathe of the lesser elite. This would be no more popular than Stolypin's reforms, and perhaps no more successful.

So maybe instead we should look to Peter the Great, Russia's ruler from 1682 to 1725, another ruler with whom Putin certainly sees some parallel. Peter was a man of indefatigable energy, boundless ambition and passionately modernizing impulses. Peter built Putin's home city of St. Petersburg, a mega-project like that of Olympic venue Sochi. He crushed risings and coups with ruthless vigor, founded the Russian navy and fought traditional enemies the Swedes to a standstill.

Visionary, to be sure, but how great a model for Putin? His ideas of reform and modernization looked to the West for inspiration. Peter himself traveled to Holland and England to learn their skills and ways, importing specialists and ideas alike. He even made the boyars cut off their luxurious facial hair to look more Western, or pay a special beard tax.

This sounds like the very opposite of Putin's campaign to preserve Russian culture from creeping Westernization. If anything, it is closer to the kind of "third way" associated with Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev.

Finally, then, how about Ivan I, prince of Moscow between 1325 and 1340? He was the architect of the "gathering of the Russian lands" as the fragmented principalities of the Rus people progressively came under Moscow's rule, a medieval creation of the "power vertical" that sounds close to Putin's heart now that Crimea is back in the fold and Novorossia is in play.

How did Ivan accomplish this? Ah, there's the rub. His nickname was Kalita, "moneybags," and perhaps the main reason for his wealth — which allowed him to buy land, influence over impoverished neighbors and fighting men alike — was his close relationship with the Mongols, who had conquered the Russians the century before. In short, he was their prime agent, tax collector and all-round local agent and crony.

Putin clearly would like to "gather the Soviet lands" — or at least part of them — back under

Moscow's control, but in the current circumstances where can he find the resources for such empire-building? Again, the answer would be to the east. But Beijing is no more altruistic than the great khans, as we saw in recent gas deals in which the Chinese, knowing Putin needed a deal, drove very hard bargains indeed.

For them to bankroll Putin's new imperial project, they would have to gain at least as much from the relationship. Would Putin really be willing to acquire regional hegemony if the price were falling under China's continental hegemony?

A lack of serious reform risks dooming Russia to a gradual, shabby decline. But every reform carries costs: the risk of a backlash from the masses and the elite, the need to abandon his nationalist vision or, even, the horror of subordination to an outside power. In short, history offers Putin many options but few comforts.

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