

Putin: A Soviet Leader for the 21st Century

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President Vladimir Putin is known for his love of Russian history. Like many in this country, he knows it is full of errors and crimes — especially during the last 100 years. However, he is interested in viewing those crimes not from the perspective of society, but from the vantage point of the Kremlin.

"The greatest criminals in our history were those weaklings who threw the power on the floor — Tsar Nicholas II and Mikhail Gorbachev — who allowed the power to be picked up by the hysterics and the madmen," Ben Judah reported Putin to have told his inner circle, in an article that appeared in Newsweek in July 2014. According to that source, Judah reports, "the president vowed never to do the same."

As part of his plan to avoid the missteps of Nicholas II and Gorbachev, Putin decided not to limit access to strong alcohol, reducing the minimum price of vodka in February. From the societal standpoint, the easy availability of vodka is a public health problem. But as seen from above, it is a means of controlling the masses.

However, it is also possible to overemphasize the wrong aspects of Russia's past, as the Kremlin has done in deciding to purge the Perm-36 museum — a monument to Soviet-era repression — of all mention of crimes committed by the Soviet leadership.

It is strange in a policy based on careful attention to the lessons of history to restrict those examples to only two past leaders. Even former Soviet leader Josef Stalin made mistakes. In a live broadcast in 2009, Putin said the Stalinist era is "impossible to evaluate as a whole": on the one hand it saw massive industrialization, but on the other hand it saw massive violations of the law.

The idea of correcting the mistakes of the past, as applied here, probably means forgoing widespread massacres in favor of "targeted hits" against political enemies — a very real possibility given the recent murder of Boris Nemtsov.

In their approach to the opposition and dissidents, the authorities are apparently learning from the mistakes of past excesses by trying not to create heroes: They punish undesirables not for their politics, but for such trumped-up baser crimes as theft and fraud.

The authorities are also making progress in their work with intellectuals, giving them complete freedom to read and say what they want — albeit, within broad but strictly defined limits. More importantly, intellectuals who are unhappy with the political or economic situation in Russia are now free to travel or move abroad, thereby releasing tension from the system.

Stalin was afraid to fully include nationalism in the government's agenda, but the Putin regime is reconsidering that approach as well.

The Soviet struggle against religion was also a mistake, and the ruling regime has spent the last 15 years gradually correcting that error. The Kremlin sees that a patriotic Church with close ties to the government is a very effective tool and has therefore decided to return religion to the national agenda — with the caveat that it remain under close supervision of the state.

The ruling regime is also learning lessons from the mistakes of former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, and the annexation of Crimea — that Khrushchev transferred to Ukraine in 1954 — is not the only step in that direction.

Under Khrushchev, the Soviet Union came into direct confrontation with the West during the Berlin and Cuban missile crises, and both times leaders in Washington and Moscow had their fingers poised over the nuclear button. Putin might have concluded that it is best to avoid taking any position from which he might have to later backtrack, as Khrushchev did during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

In foreign policy, Moscow has shed the ideological trappings of the past to act more freely in supporting anyone disgruntled with Western institutions and mainstream thinking — from forces on the extreme left and right to separatist parties and organizations. Why bother trying to sell an ideology to the world when Russia can actively undermine other countries' ideologies and truths?

According to the professionals who run Russia's state-controlled media, objective or absolute truth does not exist: There are only interpretations of reality and "infotainment." And Russian media catering to a foreign audience has made one major shift: instead of telling the world how great Russia looks, they focus on how bad the West looks. That approach is much simpler and more effective.

The Soviet state's attempt at modernization fell short by refusing, in principle, to grant individuals rights to autonomy, liberty and property. But it was rebelling against a purely Western approach. Today's Russia rejects Western-style competition, the rule of law and independent institutions while allowing capitalism and certain changes to economic and social policy under strictly controlled limits.

The result is an attempt to strengthen the Soviet experiment and take it to its logical conclusion. Thus, the Putin regime defines "better" not in absolute terms, but as improving upon the performance of former Soviet leaders Vladimir Lenin, Josef Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev, Leonid Brezhnev, Yury Andropov and Mikhail Gorbachev.

The Kremlin's lack of a full-fledged constructive plan for the future or an ideology behind it is itself an attempt to improve upon past errors. This "de facto plan" plays out in the authorities' attempt to play the same game as before, but to play it smarter.

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