

The Secret to Putin's Political Survival (Op-Ed)

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President Vladimir Putin's political survival skills are just about feline; they say cats have nine lives. Well, the Russian president manages to maintain a stable and high approval rating, no matter what is going on around him; it is not affected by the sinking of the Kursk submarine, the fall of the ruble, terrorist bombings of Domodedovo Airport, or even his divorce.

What's the explanation behind this? There are a number of theories, but I have my own.

It's necessary to understand, first of all, how dependent Putin's policies are. Not on any kind of financial powers or political clans (the standard candidates here are the military or St. Petersburg groups), but on the past, which, as we all know, determines the present.

It's not immediately obvious, but his ties to the past are solid and multi-layered. Some of Putin's policies have roots far back in the past, and some have roots in more recent times. But even the latter are already history at this point.

The farthest back those roots go is to the birth of the Russian state; that point marks the beginning of the idea (one held not just by elites, but in the lower rungs of society as well) that the state is more important than the individual. This is, however, a double-edged sword. We can find instances in Russian history where that belief saved the day in a crisis.

We can say, for example, that the willingness of the Russian people to sacrifice themselves helped the country survive invasions by Napoleon and Hitler. On the other hand, this philosophy, with rare exceptions, continues to produce citizens lacking independence and too reliant on the soulless monster of the state.

Few understand, unfortunately, that even if Vladimir Putin tried to break with this tradition (which he does not want to do), it's unlikely he would be able to get very far. It would require decades of tenacious treatment, not only a single generation. Russia has undergone a number of upheavals and revolutions in its time, but no one has ever made a serious attempt to change anything in this area.

The people at the top have an easier time governing this way, and those below are used to living this way. Freedom means the heavy burden of choice; many Russians, unfortunately, are used to going where they are directed and doing what they are told. Most importantly, this philosophy made life easier for the tsars, general secretaries, and then the Russian presidents, starting with the very first, Boris Yeltsin, who chose Putin as his successor.

And that is only one example of Russia's dependence (from the president to the lower rungs) on the distant past. There are many more.

At the same time, it is this dependence that hides the secret to Putin's endurance. You can examine it from many different angles. It is here you will find the people's fear of shaking the foundations of the state.

All the more because the memory of how dangerous that can be is fresh in everyone's minds. Or the old belief that it is the tsar's boyar advisers who hold all the blame. As if the modern boyars don't regularly appear at the Kremlin to report to the president. The tradition of blaming everything on those close to the country's ruler is a very old, and still very effective lightning rod.

But even more important is Putin's connection to the recent past. Here we will have to take a separate look at domestic and international politics, since the current president inherited the former from the bourgeois revolution of the 1990s, and created the latter on his own.

Without a doubt, Putin did make many changes in comparison with the Yeltsin era, but the core remained the same. One of the few Russian democrats willing to give his frank opinion of the results of the 1990s, historian and publicist Dmitry Furman, wrote the following when comparing the outcomes of Yeltsin's rule with Gorbachev's perestroika: "Its unlawful nature is not an 'imperfection' of our system, which itself arose through a series of completely unlawful acts (the Belavezha Accords, the 1993 putsch, the more than dubious referendum on the Constitution, privatization, etc.) is an inherent part of it, its essence."

I hope that the reader will understand the meaning of the word "inherent" here, that is, referring to the same thing — a connection to the past.

Furman also aptly described the further development of this system, in which laws are used to mask tyranny, as Kafka-esque. I agree. And we've been living in this irrational, surrealist, Kafka-esque world ever since, thanks to the revolutionary onslaught of our liberal bolshevists of the 1990s.

In other words, Putin's policies should theoretically be working against him. This corrosion is gradually, imperceptibly happening, but is as yet more than compensated in Russian society by its full support for his international policies. Again, Putin inherited his domestic policies, but determined his own international approach.

Yeltsin just didn't have time to focus on global issues; too much of his efforts went into his struggle for power. What is more, Russia was still extremely weak at the time, and simply could not seriously defend its sovereignty. Not to mention, the head of the Foreign Ministry at the time, Andrei Kozyrev, wasn't interested in Russian sovereignty. He was all set to fall into the arms of the West for a never-ending kiss.

Meanwhile, the concept of sovereignty has always been more important to Russia than, say, for many Western countries. This relates primarily to smaller countries, who therefore dependent on others from the beginning. It's no surprise, then, that Nietzsche once said that "Russia is the opposite of the pathetic nervousness of small European states." No offense, as the saying goes.

That is why, unlike Europe, Russia took the first possible opportunity (Putin's Munich speech in 2007) to categorically reject all attempts by the U.S. to make it one more American vassal state. Much has happened since Munich, of course, but it seems to me that Munich was the start of the gradual worsening in Russian-American relations.

It's easy to see the "split personality" of the average Russian. He doesn't like a lot of what the government does domestically, but he can't help supporting Putin's independent course in the international arena. Particularly during sanctions from the West. Finally, he agrees that the world has changed from one clear international leader to many. Here, from his point of view, history is on Russia's side.

And if we apply all this logic to the past, to the unique Russian mentality, which the West stubbornly ignores, then the secret to Putin's invincibility becomes clear. Who can bring him down, if he's shielded on one side by traditional Russian patriotism, and on the other, by U.S. President Barack Obama and his clumsy sanctions?

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